STAGING AVATARIZATION:

POTENTIALITY, SIMULTANEITY, AND IN-BETWEENNESS

IN CONTEMPORARY THEATRE

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, Osman Can Aktan, certify that

- I am the sole author of this thesis and that I have fully acknowledged and documented in my thesis all sources of ideas and words, including digital resources, which have been produced or published by another person or institution;
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ABSTRACT

Staging Avatarization:

Potentiality, Simultaneity, and In-Betweenness in Contemporary Theatre

This thesis examines three American contemporary plays in the context of avatarization, which is characterized by three key features: potentiality, simultaneity, in-betweenness. Through the framework of these three pillars, it investigates the thematic and formal strategies followed in order to aptly represent the interwovenness of cyber and material spaces in the twenty-first century with a specific emphasis on how this interminglednes necessitates a cyberstage that can account for both of the spatialities involved. The three plays covered in the thesis are *The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow* (2003) by Rolin Jones, *Marjorie Prime* (2016) by Jordan Harrison, and *The (Curious Case of the) Watson Intelligence* (2014) by Madeleine George. All of these plays, while exploring new territories through virtuality, hearken back to the prominent themes of modern American drama such as the reconstruction of nuclear family or the search for domestic bliss. Instead of producing theatre in the cyber realm or entirely immersing the artform into virtuality, these plays construct a symbiotic domain where the material and cyber elements cohabit the stage. In doing so, they address the virtual issues posed by avatarization while also not sacrificing the tactility of the traditional theatre stage. Therefore, this thesis concludes that, the formal and thematic theatrical innovations mimicking the interwovenness of different spatialities in the online age fashion a fresh medium that can both account for the domestic themes of modern drama and tackle the novel dilemmas presented by the concept of avatarization.

ÖZET

Avatarizasyonu Sahnelemek:

Modern Tiyatroda Potansiyellik, Eşzamanlılık ve Aradalık

Bu tez, üç adet Amerikan modern tiyatro oyununu potansiyellik, eşzamanlılık, aradalık özellikleriyle karakterize edilen avatarizasyon bağlamında inceler. Bu çalışma, bu üç sütun çerçevesinde, yirmi birinci yüzyıldaki siber ve materyal öğelerin iç içe geçmişliğini uygun bir şekilde yansıtabilmek için kullanılan tematik ve biçimsel stratejileri, bu iç içeliğin içerdiği iki mekansallığı da kaldırabilecek bir sibersahne ihtiyacına özellikle vurgu yaparak araştırır. Bu tezin içerdiği eserler Rolin Jones'un *The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow* (2003), Jordan Harrison'ın *Marjorie Prime* (2016), ve Madeleine George'un *The (Curious Case of the) Watson Intelligence* (2014) oyunlarıdır. Bu oyunların tümü sanallık üzerinden yeni alanlar keşfederken bir yandan da modern Amerikan tiyatrosunun meşhur temalarından çekirdek ailenin yeniden inşası ya da aile saadeti gibi bazılarına geri döner. Tiyatro eserlerini siber alemde üretmek ya da tiyatro sanatını tümüyle sanallığa daldırmak yerine bu oyunlar materyal ve siber öğelerin sahnenin tamamını paylaşabildiği sembiyotik bir alan inşa eder. Bu sayede avatarizasyon tarafından ortaya çıkarılan sanal mevzulara değinirken geleneksel tiyatro sahnesinin dokunsallığını da feda etmemeyi başarırlar. Bu sebeplerle, bu tez çevrimiçi çağda farklı mekansallıkların iç içe geçmişliğini yansıtan biçimsel ve tematik yeniliklerin, hem modern tiyatronun ev ve aile ile ilgili temalarını konu edinen hem de avatarizasyon konsepti tarafından sunulan yeni ikilemlere hitap eden taze bir medyum tasarladığını savunur.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I aim to focus on concepts that are central to the twenty-first century's mode of communication, as well as to the contemporary stage. The concepts that are the keywords of this thesis are potentiality, simultaneity, and in-betweenness, and they are investigated through the lens of avatarization. The texts I choose to examine in relation to this framework are *The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow* (2003) by Rolin Jones, *Marjorie Prime* (2016) by Jordan Harrison, and *The (Curious Case of the) Watson Intelligence* (2014) by Madeleine George. All three of these plays excel in their thematic and formal representation of the concepts I listed and therefore enable me to vividly demonstrate my arguments on how potentiality, simultaneity, and in-betweenness are the emblematic features of human relationships and communication in the age of the avatar. Through these plays, I aim to explore the avenues that playwrights discover or construct on stage to thoroughly capture and reflect the zeitgeist of the online age, be it their use of space, time and sound, or their representation of the altered domesticity that results from the penetration of avatars into the most intimate spheres of human correspondence.

All of the plays included in the thesis make use of some version of cyberspace in their narrative of modern means of interaction, and they further incorporate the notion of the avatar, an essential figure in understanding cyberspace and humanity's immersion in this new spatiality. Referring to the encrypted, coded representations of real people, avatars stand for the compensatory existence of humans in cyberspace. Increasingly popular, if not necessary, in contemporary communication, avatars are far beyond the point where they can be neglected and

ignored in art. Drama of course is no exception to this sweeping new urgency of avatars and their involvement in daily activities. In line with the immersive essence of the concept, many contemporary theatre exercises implement this alternative form of spatiality in their performances. Along with numerous others, the three plays chosen for this thesis aptly stage this alternative spatiality involving the juxtaposition of cyber and material spaces. Characterized by ubiquity and uncertainty, the abstract form of avatarization within the plays is reflected upon the concrete nature of materiality, both challenging the notion of a clearly distinct spatiality and reinstating a novel version of domesticity intruded upon by cyberspace and its components. Using formal elements such as lighting and soundscapes innovatively and reinventing resilient modern themes such as maternal fantasies, familial harmony, or domestic bliss in accordance with the entangled conceptualization of a newly formed mixed spatiality, the plays analyzed within this thesis provide a felicitous habitat for the conjured avatars.

Peter Brook's famous opening sentence to his *The Empty Space*, which was first published in 1968 claims, "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage" (1996, p. 7). As Brooks indicates, it does not take much to equate a physical, spatial existence with a stage. One could easily argue that this has been a constant since the dawn of the genre: the theatre stage has always been a medium whose spatiality is deconstructed and reconstructed in accordance with its content, as well as the dictates of its particular historical contexts. As a range of scholars have argued, however, the critical issue is often not about identifying an environment as a stage, but rather about defining its interaction with its content, and how one stage is different from the other. This thesis argues that theater's contemporary spatial challenge is to represent

the incipient domain of cyberspace, which stands apart from the physicality of Brook's empty space in its *undelineability*.

Coined by William Gibson in a short story and then employed in his seminal Sprawl Trilogy, the term cyberspace refers to the online realm, where "lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data . . . . recede, . . . like city lights" (1984, p. 94). Likening the content of cyberspace to city lights while also describing it as 'nonspace,' Gibson juxtaposes the most familiar locus of the modern human with the negation of space. This quality of spatial indeterminacy pertaining to cyberspace is intimately linked, and in fact, almost a prerequisite to its intrinsic features: potentiality, simultaneity, in-betweenness. Representing cyberspace thus involves not only capturing inter-network interactions, but also the possibilities, uncertainties, and ambiguities they pose. Cyberspace thus poses a challenge to Brook's basic scheme: how about non/pseudo-spatial environments? Can one speak of emptiness in cyberspace? What does it contain that makes it not empty, or what does it lack, such that it becomes empty? Such a conceptual *topos* seemingly stripped from physicality is hard to pinpoint and reconcile with the traditional, material stage.

The ways the three plays involved in this thesis individually tackle the suggested issues are diverse. *The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow* by Rolin Jones revives one of the popular themes of modern drama, the reconstruction of the nuclear family, in an era of robotic substitution. The agoraphobia of the Californian protagonist Jennifer Marcus prevents her from personally visiting her birthmother, who lives in China. This ultimately forces her to explore alternative methods of navigation through the vast distance in-between, a challenge that, in turn, alters the spatial delineations that distinguish cyber and material spaces. *Marjorie Prime* by

Jordan Harrison similarly focuses on intra-familial issues and the family members' attempts at reestablishing domestic harmony following the demise of the father of the family, Walter, and dementia suffered by the eponymous mother of the play, Marjorie. The holographic replacements of deceased people, the Primes, open up many unexplored routes through which the family strives to find their way and make sense of this unfamiliar mode of communication with the dead while also endeavoring to make peace with the process of establishing a human connection with a pixelated image. In doing so, the play manages to vividly exhibit the amalgamation of cyber and material entities and events. Finally, *The (Curious Case of the) Watson Intelligence* (2014) by Madeleine George strays from the familial theme while still remaining in the domestic realm and focusing on personal correspondences. In using a simultaneous staging depicting four different timelines and several different versions of the same characters, George devises a fitting representation for the multifaceted, ambiguous, and volatile content.

My arguments throughout this thesis aim to constitute a sustained effort to point out the central concepts of potentiality, simultaneity, and in-betweenness that characterize the contemporary content of avatarization and to demonstrate through the three plays I chose how these concepts are embodied and employed on stage. Although it is a popular endeavor to reveal and identify the cyber features in contemporary immersive performances, how these techno-centric additions into the artform relate back to some of the older questions that are particularly intimate, personal, and domestic is a relatively nascent question with few speculations around it. I am aware that a considerably large theatrical foundation exists around the phenomena of the industrial revolution and the effects of the explosive progress of technology on humans. Yet, the overwhelming majority of these texts focus on the

impact of these changes on society and economics while the three texts chosen for this thesis are noticeably depoliticized and immensely concentrated on individual subjects and their domestic interactions. Therefore, I believe a closer examination of this novel locus of intersectionality is needed for the literature and it might establish a ground for further analyses of how theatre reacts/will react to the extreme involvement of computer technologies in the most intimate spheres of our lives.

1.1 Defining and unshackling the cyberstage

The initial impulse of theatre-making in the online age is to follow the trend of establishing a projected presence on the internet, an avatar version of the material stage online (Papagiannouli, 2016, p. 2); we might refer to this as the avatarization of the stage, which is different from staging avatarization. The internet and its cyber nature force one's hand to theorize towards a stage that is immersed in cyberspace in its entirety. So, the first attempt at a solution to keep the art alive in the online age involves carrying the physical elements of drama into cyberspace so that the theatre stage can survive the transition into this new environment. This method requires the stage to become a locus of virtuality as a whole, including its connections with the audience. Many speculations on the subject, therefore, regard the phenomenon of theatre performance in the online age in line with the notion of the avatarization of the stage (Papagiannouli, 2011, p. 275),

> In the modern world of computerized data management and instantaneous information dispersal, a person's basic mode of location is altered. Instead of experiencing life from a fixed point in space and time, the subject of the electronic society is, as Mark Poster writes, "multiplied by databases, dispersed by computer messaging and conferencing, decontextualized and reidentified by TV ads, dissolved and materialized continuously in the electronic transmission of symbols" (Poster, 1990, p. 74, cited within Chaudhuri, 1997, pp. 3-4).

According to Christina Papagiannouli's terminology, for instance, cyberformance refers to "the use of cyberspace as a theatrical stage," deriving its essence from Helen Varley Jamieson's definition: "live performance that utilizes internet technologies to bring remote performers together in real time, for remote and/or proximal audiences" (Jamieson, 2008; Papagiannouli, 2011). According to these critics, cyberstage is where cyberformance takes place, and it is strictly online:

> Cyberformance is a genre of digital performance that uses the Internet as a performance space or a cyberstage: 'a socio-political in-between space and non-space, where the participants are present and absent at the same time in a live and mediatised experience' (Papagiannouli 2013, p. 61).

Although this adaptation is useful in keeping drama alive through avatarization, I argue that it disregards and disables any materiality that drama does or might involve. Furthermore, Matthew Causey acknowledges that this total immersion into virtuality poses a lot of problems for genre distinctions, adding that "many examples of cyber-theatre might be better described as interactive film/TV, installation art, new media art, or electronic communications" (2003, p. 341).

At the same time, the characteristics of avatarization (potentiality, simultaneity, in-betweenness) are well accounted for in this codified new stage, where experience and actuality need not be identical. Causey also acknowledges this fact:

> Within a virtual environment, the spectator is transposed into a digital space in which culturally based identities such as ethnicity, class and gender are volatile, not fixed categories. User/operators are free to perform via imagistic avatar icons or text-based identities with any identification they choose; gender, race and class become performative differentiation, not fixed, hierarchical assignments within a social order. (2006, p. 59)

Unlike Causey, however, I believe that the digitalization of space does not rely on the total immersion into cyberspace, on the contrary, an absolute migration contradicts the fundamentals of the codified environment in terms of spatiality.

Fixating the stage in a cyber-environment forces one to locate the stage as extrinsic to materiality and intrinsic to cyberspace, while neutralizing the spatial in-betweenness of mediatized content. My argument is that the stage of computerized thematics is always already a cyberstage, by virtue of its enabling and mimicking potentiality, simultaneity, and in-betweenness.

Since this newly formed location, the cyberstage, has many nooks and crannies yet to be explored, theorization around it is inefficient. The meaning I prefer and adhere to applies a small tweak to Papagiannouli's definition and refers to any form of staging that involves and utilizes cyber elements. So, the new definition becomes "the use of cyberspace *in* a theatrical *staging.*" A definition for the cyberstage that requires the performance to be spectated through an electronic device is too narrow and too limited for a concept that actively and consistently challenges physical limitations. Therefore, what converts a stage into a cyberstage is not its compulsory screening via a gadget, but the existence of the characteristics of cyberspace in the space of performance. These entities may include stage props, visual effects, communication methods, alternative uses of space, characters, and thematic multiplicities that align with the features of virtuality.

Challenges remain, however: how does one liberate theatre from this newly confined locus, barred within binary codes? How does one escape from the virtual realm and revive a corporeal artform in the age of the World Wide Web? How does one perforate the liminal wall between cyberspace and the material space so that art itself can survive on the cyberstage, which becomes a compound of virtual and physical spaces that leak into each other? The plays I choose to investigate in my thesis tackle these challenges both thematically and formally. The thematic intertwinement of material and immaterial spaces takes place by reinventing

twentieth century drama's familial and domestic themes in the age of avatarization. Thrusting robots and holograms into the interiors of personal relationships, all three plays establish unlikely combinations between the past and future, machines and humans, material and immaterial. This thematic concomitance projects itself onto the stage through the formal aspects of the plays. The element of space in *Jenny Chow* is manipulated to represent the simultaneous nature of avatarized correspondence by dividing the stage into several compartments that are thousands of miles apart yet exist next to each other on display. The material distance in-between is travelled by the robot proxy while the protagonist sits in her room and controls her agents by pushing buttons on her keyboard. In parallelism with the behavior of its protagonist, the play changes the location on stage from California to Shanghai at the mere flick of a light switch. *Marjorie Prime*, rather than focusing on the physical boundaries between the inside and outside, stages the entire action inside the living room of the family, cohabited by people and avatars alike. Holographic substitutions of perished family members share the "living" room, albeit with their non-biological constitutions. In disrupting the liminal wall in-between, the spaces for the human and the humanoid object coalesce into one *living* room. Entirely built upon the idea of inevitable interconnectedness, *Watson Intelligence* also challenges the notion of clearly delineated, distinct spaces. Braiding the story around the telephone, the invention that both enables communication between remote people and hinders physical interaction merely due to the fact that it does away with the necessity of it, Madeleine George constructs an unpredictable tale that oscillates between different timelines, locations, and characters that simultaneously populate the stage and transform into the relevant version in accordance with the particular content at that moment.

1.2 Potentiality, simultaneity, in-betweenness

As the internet has penetrated into every aspect of life, the idea of communication has strayed away from the previous, intuitive understanding constructed in the days of mass media. Information no longer emanates from a singular source, instead, it seeps through almost every electronic device, an omnipresent flood that is not linear. Today, information is a simulacral entity continuously generated within the cyber-universe and disseminated into everyday life with – at most – a residual, trace amount of connection to its source. That is why, the content is never actual, singular, or fixed; but instead, always potential, simultaneous, and in-between. As a space that can encompass physical elements and cyber elements at the same time, the cyberstage is uniquely suited to depicting the omnipresent communication of this age, while also not giving up on the carnal performativity of drama. Put differently, the communication technologies of the twenty-first century are forcing artists to create a physical environment that is suitable for projecting virtual reality, thus creating a hybrid structure that can contain the effervescent zeitgeist of the online age.

The three terms that I have chosen to characterize the intermingling of material and virtual spaces are potentiality, simultaneity, and in-betweenness. Potentiality, as the opposite of actuality, refers to an indeterministic approach to theatre making where endless possibilities are still open to entities on stage rather than a method that produces finalized versions where all other probabilities are exhausted. As Zornitsa Dimitrova argues:

> Whereas the concept of actuality pertains to fully individualized, actual and final entities, the notion of potentiality in the Aristotelian tradition and beyond foregrounds a wealth of indeterminacy and an intensification of that which can exist. (2016, p. 65)

Focusing not on what exists, but alternatively, what *can* exist, a stage of potentiality thoroughly captures the uncertain nature of cyberspace, where inter-network communication ceaselessly generates combinations with exponential intensity that therefore rescues it from singularity and finality. The stage that involves potentiality as one of its features is always imprecise, unrealized, capable, and in-the-making. Never fully material or cyber, a stage of potentiality functions on both grounds.

The second characteristic of cyberspace employed in this thesis, simultaneity, is rather straightforward. Closely linked to potentiality, it implies that different timelines, places, possibilities, and entities occupy the stage concurrently. Dividing a single stage into several sections and using those portions as different locations simultaneously is an ancient technique, even theorized upon during the Medieval Era under the name of "*décor simultané"* (Postlewait, 1988, p. 7). However, while the previous format of simultaneity referred strictly to the use of space and locational specification, the contemporary version related to cyberspace includes the usage of time, characters, and even themes. Within the context of the cyberstage, simultaneity implies the concomitance of contradictory elements, oppositional forces, binary oppositions, and improbable multiplicities. It purports not merely the existence of several different things at the same time, but the interconnectedness of contrasts. It deconstructs the *x or y*, and reconstructs it as *x and y*.

Finally, in-betweenness refers to the ambiguous nature of the cyberstage. Neither material nor virtual, neither present nor absent, in-betweenness implies a permeable and vacillatory structure:

> The in-betweenness of the cyberstage reveals the intermedial character of cyberformance – a *metaxy*, Plato and Aristotle's notion of in-betweenness, that is, a situation in-between different mediums such as theatre and the Internet, theory and practice, and live and mediatized performance. (Papagiannouli, 2016, p. 28)

One thing to clarify about this feature is that it is different from interstitiality, which is often used interchangeably with in-betweenness. While interstitiality alludes to an intervening section between two distinct spaces, in-betweenness as it is used within this thesis suggests the interminglednes and ambiguation of said spaces and their boundaries. Whereas it is possible to locate interstices due to their static existence amid two opposing regions, in-betweenness proposes a ubiquitous and dynamic phenomenon that resists any stationary particularization.

Although all three features are apparent in all three plays involved in this thesis, they are not equally foregrounded in the analyses of each play. For example, the dominant feature(s) in Rolin Jones's *The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow* are potentiality and simultaneity, whereas Jordan Harrison's *Marjorie Prime* focuses on in-betweenness. In Madeleine George's *The (Curious Case of the) Watson Intelligence*, on the other hand, all three keywords are equally foregrounded.

1.3 Staging avatarization

What is avatar/ization? In its religious context, specifically in Hinduism, the word avatar refers to a divinity incarnate, the bodily form of a deity.[1] If translated into a Platonic vocabulary, it follows that if the divine realm is imagined to be the place of the real, the material form of things is the represented, simulated version of that actuality on Earth. Mirroring this transition, if the corporeal world is imagined to be the place of real existence, the cyber form of things is the projection of the physical body into cyberspace where every presence is simulated as the online substitute of some material form. Avatarization, then, is the process of creating a virtual

[1] https://www.britannica.com/summary/avatar-Hinduism#:~:text=avatar%2C%20In%20Hinduism%2C%20the%20incarnation,the%20incarnation%20yet%20to%20come)

representation for said materiality, a compensatory form where the material cannot exist as itself.

The avatar's definition as a compensatory form, a virtual representation forces one to think about the concept of theatre in the broader context. In many ways, avatarization is coeval with theatre itself in the sense that what is on stage, and the stage itself for that matter, is always already a compensatory form, a virtual representation of something/someone else, and acting is always already avatarization. Having noted and acknowledged this, I want to emphasize that my arguments do not limit the concept of avatarization into a clearly delineated definition of immersion into the realm of binary codes, albeit involving it.

As Matthew Causey diagnoses, the will to virtuality is not indigenous to the twenty-first century:

> … the will to virtuality, the will to be replaced, duplicated, removed from the real and delivered up to fantasy, to smash the material and elevate interiority, to suppress the political and hold to the metaphysical, cycling out of the eternal recurrence of the same thing into a wired world where technology demands revealing, is not a computer-age compulsion alone, but a trans-historical phenomena. (2006, p. 64)

Hence, one should not expect this pixelated substitution in cyberspace to be the only form of avatarization. In the plays examined in this thesis, avatars take many forms. In *The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow*, avatars can be located in many different places under many different definitions. Due to the protagonist's specific situation that cages her into her house, her compensatory existence outside the house depends on her avatars. The characters outside exist most of the time to help her with her project in realms that she cannot physically traverse. Avatars in *Marjorie Prime* are the holographic representations of deceased people that can interact with other people and store the information exchanged within those dialogues. Throughout the play, Primes' ability to memorize and Marjorie's dementia are counterposed against

each other, and the interplay in-between vividly showcases the transference of lived experience into non-human objects that live forever while humans forget and die. Once again, humans' compensatory existence through their avatars where they cannot survive and exist is emphasized. Lastly, in *Watson Intelligence*, as in Jones's text, proxy agency is often the form avatars take, where they perform tasks for the person who cannot include themselves in certain situations, and this ability to conduct business through proxies is often yearned for throughout the play. However, as this thesis's main argument suggests, beyond the individual and singular appearances of avatars on stage, in all three plays the characteristics of the process of avatarization and how these characteristics are/can be manifested on the contemporary theatre stage is in question. In other words, how are the distinguishing features of avatarization, namely potentiality, simultaneity, and in-betweenness, staged?

The argument for the interwovenness of material and cyber spaces derives its essence from the posthumanist tradition, which advocates that disentangling the human from its surroundings is not that easy of a task (Haraway, 1985, pp. 11, 22, 35). An important challenge to the categorization – and in fact the hierarchization – of the human is raised by historian Bruce Mazlish in his prominent work *The Fourth Discontinuity* (1993), which invokes Sigmund Freud's three discontinuities in human history.

These three supposedly stratifying divergences are claims that put homo sapiens on a pedestal and that are eliminated by the prominent scientists of the past. First, Galileo Galilei and Nicolaus Copernicus shattered the anthropocentric image of the cosmos, pushing our beloved earth down to the ranks of countless other planets. Then came Charles Darwin with his theory of evolution by natural selection,

challenging all religious and anthropological dogmas that glorified man as the highest material being, and nudging homo sapiens all the way down amongst the likes of amoebae or algae. Third was Sigmund Freud himself (arguably along with Carl Gustav Jung) who, in Anson Rabinbach's words, bridged "the 'illusory' divide[s]" between "man and nature" (2018, p. 1). Freud's work also problematized the limits of consciousness and questioned how much our subconscious controls and shapes us, and hence, how much of our 'self' is actually under our command.

Mazlish's fourth discontinuity refers to the new symbiosis between humans and machines that has been theorized upon by the likes of Donna Haraway (1985), Hans Moravec (1989, 1990, 2000), Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1980), and Norbert Wiener (1948) as early as the 1940s and by more contemporary scholars such as Katherine Hayles (1999), Cary Wolfe (2009), Peter Mahon (2017), Neil H. Kessler (2019), Riccardo Campa (2015), Ann Weinstone (2004), Ursula K. Heise (2016). Mazlish's account is unique in terms of historically locating this phenomenon and is often referred to for his apt categorization of the issue by the likes of Anson Rabinbach (2018), Matthew Causey (2006), and Jelena Riskin (2003). The basis of Mazlish's argument stands on the claim that it is not as easy as it once was for humans to claim authority over machines. Implied in the noun *symbiosis,* these discontinuities blur the boundaries between humans and others, and challenge our categorized understanding of our ecology. Pronouns and prepositions that are some of the most effective tools of specification and disambiguation lose their potency. Because of the fact that we cannot conclusively delineate and disentangle homo sapiens, it is immensely harder to juxtapose it with *others*.

Almost thirty years after Mazlish's seminal work, questions regarding the human-machine symbiosis remain essentially the same. However, an incipient

domain back then, cyberspace today is an endless field of inquiry that has gradually asserted its authority over this particular attempt at disentangling the human from the above-mentioned symbiosis. As Mark Poster states:

> If I can speak directly to a friend in Paris while sitting in California, if I can witness political and cultural events as they occur across the globe without leaving my home, . . . then where am I and who am I? In these circumstances, I cannot consider myself centered in my rational, autonomous subjectivity or bordered by a defined ego, but I am disrupted, subverted, and dispersed across social space. (1990, p. 74)

Thus, the struggle to situate the human continues. Where is the human in cyberspace? How do we locate it? Does it stand in opposition to the AI, and incidentally, where is AI? Is it in the womb of the motherboard? Is it waiting in its chrysalis woven with the World Wide Web of the twenty-first century for its eclosion as a cybernetic butterfly? Or did it already hatch its egg, tear its embryonic membrane, and become one with ones and zeros?

1.4 The intelligent design of Rolin Jones through potentiality and simultaneity

Rolin Jones' *The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow* tells the story of the agoraphobic protagonist, Jennifer Marcus, who is an adopted child living in California and aspiring to meet her birthmother in China. The initial – and in fact crucial – point that attracts attention is this juxtaposition of an adolescent unable to move, and a vast distance that needs to be traversed. Immediately problematized by this unsettling juxtaposition, the use of space in the play invokes an alternative urgency, forcing one to reconsider the individual and their relation to spatiality. Taking advantage of the technological means of the twenty-first century, Jennifer Marcus comes up with a method that enables her to fly to China and be with her mother in a "sorta-kinda way": her robotic creation, Jenny Chow, will reconstitute the long-lost maternal bond

by traveling to China on her behalf, powered by rocket propulsion (Jones, 2003, p. 34).

Jones's basic plot thus produces questions that resonate with the central concerns of my thesis: Is Jennifer Marcus really a fixed individual unable to leave her room or do the instant messages and proxy agents she sends all over the world disperse her throughout immense spaces, altering her existence in connection with the spatial realms she engages with? Is she disconnected from the outside due to the simple fact that she cannot materially exist outside her house, or are the delineations between spaces not as clear as they were previously hypothesized, and one can navigate through a novel field of interwoven materiality and cybernetics? In Jones's play, the concept of spatiality does not only pertain to the stage setting but is also fundamental for the plot. Since the main crises within the piece are the need for departure and the limitations that make it a problem, the alternative perspectives offered on spatiality connect formal strategies to thematic constraints.

The subtitle of the play, *An Instant Message with Excitable Music*, provides a lot of hints as to how the content of the work and the problems within are tackled. As the subtitle suggests, the entirety of the storyline is encapsulated within an instant message. What we see on stage are flashbacks to the events involved in an instant message that Jennifer Marcus sends; the instantaneity of the whole plot immediately implies variable understandings of time and space, which forces one to consider contemporary methods of experiencing communication through text messages, video chats, and voicemails. To mimic the potentiality and simultaneity of the techno-spatiality of the twenty-first century, Jones also uses music and lighting in a way that signals transformations in space and time. These transformations enable the piece to be more than a modern story of trying to restitute a maternal bond and a nuclear

family, or a futuristic tale of online communication that showcases the contemporary means of interacting with one's surroundings, immediate or remote. Rather, the use of music and lighting by Jones constructs a complex medium where the familiar and unfamiliar, usual and unusual, ancestral and prophetic, material and immaterial, and the present and absent penetrate into each other and demonstrate the interconnectedness and interactiveness of cyber and physical spaces in the online age.

1.5 In-betweenness of humanity in *Marjorie Prime*: Constructing a landscape peopled with holographic substitutions

Jordan Harrison's *Marjorie Prime* is a play that focuses on the convergence of technological and biological bodies while speculating on how the concepts of mortality and memory may be conceptualized through this conjoining. The play involves a recent technology, one that does not exist at the moment in our world, called Primes, which are holographic substitutions in the image of deceased family members, and it opens with a dialogue between Marjorie, who is in her eighties, and Walter Prime, the holographic version of Marjorie's late husband. Marjorie suffers from dementia and has a deteriorating memory, and her daughter Tess and son-in-law Jon help her with her daily activities and try to keep her sharp.

Similar to Jones's play that counterposes the desire to depart with agoraphobia, *Marjorie Prime* immediately presents a tension between Marjorie's attempts at recollecting her past and her dementia. Constructed on this fickle dichotomy, the concept of memory within the play is highly problematic. In addition, Primes, who are invented and produced to overcome such problems like forgetting or misremembering do not seem to be able to provide any tangible assistance, since

their memories are entirely constructed through the conversations that they have with the family members who bought them. Operating through this ambivalence between remembering and memory-making, the play gradually thins down the possibility of reaching an absolute reality within the past, and ultimately highlights the impossible differentiation of the real from the artificial, establishing an existence in-between.

The setting of the play involves the living room of the house and the "*dimly lit perimeter"* around the room where Primes occasionally retreat but still remain on-stage, a choreography that further strengthens their aura of in-betweenness and intermediality. The Primes' ambivalent existence on stage also points to the play's thematic vacillations regarding mortality and memory. The initial desired function of Primes is to aid family members in remembering a person as they were; yet Walter Prime's development clearly demonstrates that Primes increasingly end up becoming substitutes for their purchasers, rather that the deceased persons they are meant to replace. What then is the real purpose of interacting with such representations/avatars? In the chapter devoted to *Marjorie Prime*, I argue that Harrison's avatars are reflections of the trans-historical phenomenon that Causey diagnoses: the absence and presence of Primes epitomize the mortality of the characters on stage more than it does that of the deceased. As a result, the characters constantly oscillate between life and death, repeatedly witnessing their fatality, just as *Marjorie Prime* ambiguously wanders within the margins of reality and artificiality, corporeality and virtuality, life and death.

1.6 Multifaceted construction of a singular storyline in *The (Curious Case of the) Watson Intelligence*

The (Curious Case of the) Watson Intelligence by Madeleine George is a strange play that weaves four different timelines (1876, 1891, 1931, and 2011) together while still following a sequential story. The earliest timeline takes place in the Sherlockian world where Eliza, a distressed woman, seeks help from the detective Holmes about the mysterious puncture wounds in her arms. These are the evildoing of her paranoid husband Merrick, who aims to create a new perfection where predictable machinery replaces people and provides the elite with the highest quality of service. The 1931 timeline narrates the interview between Eliza the interviewer and Thomas Watson, Alexander Graham Bell's assistant. Finally, the twenty-first century timeline involves the software developer Eliza, her computer program Watson, the tech nerd Joshua Watson, and the city auditor candidate Merrick, who is still obsessed about his ex-wife Eliza and subsequently pays Joshua Watson to tail her and obtain information about her personal life. The thread that connects all of the action on stage is the characters' search for human connection and their struggles with the notion of dependency. Pursuing this thread, George manages to create a formally and thematically parallel work that ostensibly progresses towards detachment, fragmentation, disconnectedness, and independence while ultimately constructing a view that is braided, entangled, interconnected, and inevitably dependent.

The four different timelines within the play involve different versions of the same characters: Watson, Eliza, and Merrick. The set design is also fundamentally the same except for some minor contemporary indicators such as Starbucks cups or laptops. Nevertheless, the main issue about the formal elements of the play is that they are dictated by the content or the story. George never openly states the timeline

on stage. The audience relies on the occasional train whistle, the particular ringing of a telephone, or the version of English used during the conversations to make out the timeline at hand. The transitions between time periods, spaces, and characters are also not signaled or announced. Such a strategy charges every moment of the play with potentiality, indicating that any variable at any particular moment may change without warning and there is not a single, *actual* storyline, but a multiplicity of simultaneous potentials, all equally likely to occupy the stage.

The plot progresses through the social networks characters construct amongst themselves. These networks are sometimes based on their romantic relationships, sometimes on professional correspondences, and sometimes on confrontational interactions. Seemingly striving to gain absolute independence, characters are consistently shown to fall back into an inescapable interconnectedness. Proliferating the combinations among these networks with each time-shift, George constructs a story that thoroughly mimics the overall claim to the inevitability of dependence and interconnectedness asserted by Thomas Watson, who is the historical assistant to the famous Alexander Graham Bell: “If we did not rely upon each other so deeply, our nation would not now be strung like a vast, glittering web with eight million miles of connecting wire.” (2014, p. 80). The structure that converts the stage into a multilayered topos signifies the consequential multiplication of characters, space, and time. All of the timelines braiding into a sequential storyline, what happens on stage within a timeline also pushes forward alternative timelines. In doing so, every variable becomes a potential that awaits activation within the nonspace of the stage, ready to be substantiated and materialized. George’s play therefore operates, again just as the modern age, on a complex, functional, interconnected grid that internally enables communication between dependents world apart.

1.7 Conclusion

I should note that I am aware of the theatrical corpus that takes on the subjects of technological protrusions and their penetrations into our lives, be it industrial machinery, mass-production equipment, mass-destruction weaponry, mass-communication tools, assembly lines, or humanoid robots wherein "no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals" exist (Hayles, 1999, p. 3). I have no intention of suggesting that techno-centric issues only recently marched onto the theatre stage. However, I believe that there is an imbalance in tackling the technological material and investigating the aftermath of their progression. In fact, I am even more perplexed due to the fact that the term *robot* was coined by a playwright and yet it is consistently excluded from the dramatic canon since then. Karel Capek, in his famous *Rossum's Universal Robots* (1921), coined the term, and a century later, Rolin Jones's *Jenny Chow* is still baffling because it involves a robotic substitute. Many examples from the same period in American expressionism engages in discussions regarding humanity's exposure to modern technology. Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* (1922), Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1923), and Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* (1928) are all influential and famous works produced within the same decade with *RUR*. Heavily reliant on anti-capitalist criticism and the effects of industrial labor, mass-production, and the assembly line on the human body, these plays feature a collective class dilemma and are unignorably political.

The biggest shift between these fundamental texts and the contemporary ones analyzed in this thesis is the attention devoted to de-political, intimate, and domestic issues. Although it is possible to name sporadic examples with more individual

pivots such as Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), and Martin Crimp's *Attempts on her Life* (1997), the overwhelming majority of the work created within the genre focuses on societal and anti-capitalist commentaries in relation to technology and its repercussions. Furthermore, the specific focus on avatarization and its characteristics that are central to this thesis are more a topic of the post-www (world wide web) era.

As a fervent supporter of Carol Hanisch's famous idea of "the personal is political" (1970), I do not think that nuclear, intrafamilial and domestic drama are exempt from politics in the broader sense that refers to the power struggles in-between individuals and/or groups. However, in juxtaposition with the earlier texts that are mentioned, the three plays chosen for this thesis are transparently devoid of overt political statements in their evaluations of technocentric domestic repercussions. While plays like *The Hairy Ape* or *The Adding Machine* leave little choice for the reader to ignore the political skeleton of the texts, Jones's or Harrison's plays merely provide hints as to how one can interpret individual interrelations as political tidings taking place on stage. While I believe this acknowledgment of flexibility between politicalness and a-politicalness is necessary, I still insist on also taking note of the reluctance of the playwrights involved in this thesis towards making plain political statements.

Although this historical contextualization confines these plays into the twenty-first century, one inevitably wonders what other reasons led to the emergence of these plays at this particular point in time, with Rolin Jones's play written a decade earlier (2003) than Jordan Harrison's (2016) and Madeleine George's (2014). In such a fast-paced period of technological development, a decade is critically long. Still, I believe there is a thread that is clear enough: the biggest issue that is visible in

all three plays is the pursuit of human connection, be it with a birthmother, a deceased family member, or anyone else, that is somewhat captivated and restricted. Physical distance, personal incapability, and even death are positioned as tensions that hinder human connection, and the communication technologies invented/introduced within the plays to resolve these hindrances ironically complicate the plot further. Combined with the domestic and individual pivots, this visceral disappointment induced by the omnipresent technology of the twenty-first century that promised more connection and communication is the overlapping undertone within all three plays and seems to me to be the primary stimulation that motivated these playwrights to produce such works.

I, again, by no means claim that there are no such examples in contemporary theatre. As early as 1993, a community called The Hamnet Players used IRC (internet relay chat) to adapt William Shakespeare's plays into this new method of theatre-making. Their first production was *Hamnet* in 1993, the second was *PCBeth* in 1994, and the third was again in 1994, but this time it was an adaptation of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) as *An IRC channel named #desire*. Another example, a joint effort by the Royal Shakespeare Company and Mudlark Production Company, emerged during the early years of Twitter. This appropriation focused on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) and recreated it as a cyberformance piece using Twitter communication and renamed it as *Such Tweet Sorrow* (2010). Whit MacLaughlin's 2009 play *Fatebook: Avoiding Catastrophe One Party At a Time*, for instance, involves more than a dozen characters who only know each other through their fake social media profiles, in other words, their avatars. The interactive venue of the play implements drop-down screens where online information and footage of these characters leak into the environment of the

play, surrounding the audience and actors' bodies. Through such an immersion, MacLaughlin's interactive venue becomes a cyber-hangar due to the intrusion of cyberspace into the physical environment of the performance. A more widely-known example, Robert Lepage's *Hamlet | Collage* that premiered in 2013 is a faithful adaptation in storyline but a revolutionary take in terms of its staging. Evgeny Mironov performs in a floating cube and enacts all of the characters by himself through Hamlet's famously ruminative, schizophrenic mental processes. This creates a multi-faceted characterization in a single person on stage which "is enhanced by Lepage's lighting and video design, which inventively turns the cube from a cell of a mental asylum, to a library, to the ramparts, to a bubbling pond, amongst numerous other vivid settings"[2]. Another Shakespearean adaptation by Lepage, *Coriolanus* (n.d.), involves Roman and Volscian guards texting: "What's the news in Rome?". Jeffrey Shaw, Bill Viola, Perry Hoberman, and many others have created stunning productions tackling topics that are relevant to this thesis.

However, the three plays that I chose remain unique for the purposes of this thesis. First, differing from the vast majority of the literature, these plays feature an immense focus on individuality and the domesticity of the contemporary technological-cyber experience. Second, they make innovative use of formal elements while at the same time incorporating traditional themes of familial ties and domestic interiors. These two qualities go hand in hand in explaining why this particular selection prioritized a more traditional usage of the theatre stage in terms of its physicality. Concentrating on the domestic repercussions of cyberspace and the hybrid essence of twenty-first century spatiality, all three plays resist a complete immersion into the online realm. This resistance counterposes the three plays against

[2] https://www.sifa.sg/archive-programmes/hamlet-i-collage-advisory

the other examples listed in terms of their spatiality. While the initial impulse is to do away with the traditional stage in the face of this new matrix, this impulsivity is exactly the reason why I felt motivated to hone in on plays that do not give up the physicality of both the theatrical experience, and the human condition despite the influence of cyberspace.

Finally, there is a contradictory relationship between the attention they received from the theatre sphere and the academic sphere. All three works are Pulitzer finalists and yet there are inexplicably few materials written on the plays. The following chapters will feature my arguments regarding the thematic and formal challenges these plays tackle while also striving to provide the academic sphere with a small contribution on three brilliant plays that deserve far more attention. As these three chapters do not diverge dramatically from posthumanist leanings, such as targeting the features that ambiguate the boundaries between human and non-human, the main effort throughout the thesis is to establish how this ambiguation is further problematized by the age of avatarization; how it formally and thematically labors towards the construction of a unique theatre stage; and how in turn it is represented on this emergent medium of the cyberstage.

CHAPTER 2

THE UTERINE BLACK HOLE:

THE ECOLOGY OF THE STAGE

IN ROLIN JONES'S *THE INTELLIGENT DESIGN OF JENNY CHOW*

The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow – An Instant Message with Excitable Music by Rolin Jones (2003) is the story of Jennifer Marcus, an agoraphobic, anti-social, adopted 22-year-old Asian-American who happens to be a genius with a dash of OCD and mysophobia. A strange combination of the fetishized, stereotypical Asian tech whiz and the upper middle class "bratty" American, Jennifer Marcus is nevertheless not a familiar specimen. Not quite invested in daily chores, finding a job, maintaining personal relationships, or taking care of herself, her main interest is in building a robot, named Jenny Chow, that will travel to China and meet her biological mother, Su Yang, *for/as* her, and in doing so, restore an imagined maternal connectedness. Sharing a household with a perfectionist, barely present adoptive mother, Adele, and an always fabulously nonchalant father, Mr. Marcus, the protagonist of the play lives a turbulent life that oscillates between the expectations that she will fulfil her destiny as a genius-child and the reality of her life as a recluse.

Jennifer's world is physically confined, yet Jones endows her with a range of oddball companions. Her friend Todd[3], a below-average university student who delivers pizzas to the Marcus family, is the self-proclaimed "best driver in San Fernando Valley" and is interested in archaeology classes taught by a Professor

[3] Rolin Jones wrote *The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow* at the Yale School of Drama under the tutelage of the grand Lynn Nottage. The materials on the pages were all mined from the surroundings of the promising playwright, so much so that he jokingly utters that he "put a flying robot in there to kind of disguise the fact". He lived in San Fernando Valley in California, delivered pizzas to make his buck, and had a customer who went to the same high school with Jones. She was the school mascot, and she was afraid of stepping outside of her house. The plot of Jones' Pulitzer-finalist, Obie-winning play sparked from the gears of his own life (Walat, 2006).

Nottage (Jones, 2003, p. 48). He helps Jennifer with her quirky requests – like opening a PO box or racing a flying robot for her - without really questioning her motives or goals. Jennifer also receives help from several other people. Doctor Yakunin, for instance, is an aggressive professor who works on automata hierarchy; he is employed at Yale University, which he repeatedly likens to a barn. He is the go-to person for Jennifer in times of trouble, acting as a mentor and a provider. Terrence is a Mormon missionary with a premature ejaculation problem who looks for Jennifer's birthmother in China in exchange for nude pictures from Jennifer. Colonel Hubbard and Preston are military individuals who supply Jennifer with android parts as payments for her work in restructuring the government's missile software. Finally, the unnamed bounty hunter, whose person is indicated only by the computer message notification sounds on stage, is hired by Jennifer to track down the fugitive robot she built.

The play is framed within the dialogue between Jennifer and the bounty hunter, which progresses by following the highlights in Jennifer's diary, and the curtain falls the same way it opens: Jennifer explains to the bounty hunter what happened, in *an instant message.* Alternatively – and revealingly – defined as "*An Instant Message"* in the subtitle, the play is entirely capsulated in the chat box that connects Jennifer and the bounty hunter and all of the action on stage consists of flashbacks - although the time of the play is announced as "now, right now" by Jones (2003, p. 9). The last page of the play connects with its first page, forming a circle. In a sense, the play folds onto itself and establishes a time loop where the progression of time loses its meaning simply because any moment within it is part of the cyclical nature of a text which does not have a beginning or end, but rather infinite presents.

Jones' implantation of the play in such a timeframe, one that is infinitesimally momentary but at the same time perpetually present, allows him to explore an enduring thematic multiplicity: *The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow* is a play that is concerned with both long-standing coming-of-age themes like maternal fantasies and potential restitutions of the nuclear family, and contemporary concerns that continue to grow more relevant synchronically with the internet such as the increasingly ambiguous delineation between material space and cyberspace. Indeed, the protagonist looking for their parents is material as ancient as Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. Building a robo-Oedipus that will fulfil the prophecy and invoke the peripeteia on behalf of the protagonist himself, on the other hand, is revolutionary and hilarious. As a result, the entire play is a "purposefully" staggering "patchwork quilt" that creates a vista of unlikely syntheses (Jones, 2003, p. 7). Jones notes that:

> One of the reasons why it's worked is that the strategy of the play is to subvert expectations--to try to stay ahead of the audience. I was testing out how dramatic can you go, and then how broad can you go in the very next scene, and what happens when you slam those two scenes up together, so that you go on a little bit of a ride. And the overall magic trick is that it's set up to be a kind of suburban comedy--with some fantastical elements to it--and it ends in a pretty grim place. Whether that's legitimate or not, it stays with you a little bit. It's hard to shake. (Walat, 2006)

In this chapter, I argue that Jones's volatile and unpredictable formal alterations, including the juxtaposition of dismal and comical elements, the simultaneous articulation of fantasy and banality, the concomitance of material space and cyberspace, and the metaxic coexistence of past, present, and future on stage allows Jones to produce a patchwork that functions through potentiality and simultaneity. Through the analysis of this play, I suggest that the formal and thematic strategies employed by Jones are reflections of the overall functioning of online communication and avatarization. In line with the broader concerns of this thesis, Jones' play enables me to demonstrate how the contemporary theatre stage develops

a spatiality which can contain the volatile and unpredictable essence of the age of avatarization, while at the same time bringing older themes and questions such as the (re)construction of maternal and domestic bonds in close proximity to the nascent domain of cyberspace.

2.1 The geopathological condition of the 21st century: Agoraphobia

Characterized by -at best- an apathy towards the *outside*, the twenty-first century is the age of agoraphobia of varying degrees. The commonplace diagnoses of the last twenty years about how generation Z is an indoors generation or how they are reluctant to explore the exteriors of their immediate surroundings are far from being revolutionary anymore. Still, the weight of these diagnoses does not seem to decrease as the world slowly gets used to staying inside. As much as we, as a species, have grown to like this new way of conducting our business from our sofas, our living rooms, and through our ethernet cables, the question of the *outside* remains essential.

Una Chaudhuri, in her *Staging Place,* touches upon the "characterization of place as problem" and gives it the name "*geopathology"* (1997). This notion of the problematization of place and the focus on struggles to depart from this pathological locus is a befitting framework for both the online era and Jones's play.

In the online age, the house, a material architectural structure, is the center of all information, it vacuums data from the outside world into cyberspace, while separating the catatonic indoor observer from the physicality of the outside. Jennifer Marcus feeds on the outside through her Ethernet cable while remaining unable to escape the uterine black hole where she resides. The cable helps her alleviate and resist the symptoms of her geopathological condition and through it, she returns "to a nomadic form of existence, wandering vast global distances daily" by manipulating

the space outside, sending messages to people, and commanding her army of surrogates (Chaudhuri, 1997, p. 4).

Her mandatorily stationary existence inside this imploded mass necessitates stand-ins to conduct her activity outside of her house, thus enter her avatars and proxy identities. Avatars and proxy identities are façades created in or thrust into cyberspace to replace the real person controlling them via a gadget. Yet, Jennifer's geopathological condition suggests that the entire exterior of the house is encapsulated by cyberspace, merely because she controls that space through her devices without physically being able to exist there. The extraneous is only available to her as a codified matrix that she cannot reach physically. Therefore, the material extensions she manages through her computer codes essentially act the same way that avatars do in cyberspace, as replacements for her incapacitated materiality in a spatially separate environment. Yet, by the same token, Jones's play is also a compelling representation of the fact that cyberspace is not a detached domain, entirely disconnected from materiality. On the contrary, it is very much intermingled with the materiality of the outside – both of computers and of the house – where Jennifer's online actions always have physical consequences.

Even on a sensory level, with the widgets she designs, Jennifer manages to see, hear, and in fact touch things outside. What she builds, in essence, is what Hans Moravec calls the Robot Proxy:

> The most obvious form of remote presence involves a physical robot proxy – a distant robot that you control via the global communications network. The magic glasses allow you to see through the robot's eyes, the coat and gloves permit you to feel, gesture, and act through the robot's manipulators, and foot controls on your armchair let you drive the robot around. (1988, p. 90)

Built upon an ironic biological pursuit where the protagonist seeks a non-robotic maternity through the means of a robot proxy, Jennifer's journey provides an

example as to how physiology itself is negotiated and substituted in the online age. The inextricability of electronic and biological entities is emphasized by the journey of the robot to meet her birthmother. Enhanced bodies with prosthetic fingers, limbs, or brain-wave-reading computers do not relieve the symptoms of agoraphobia that is the syndrome of the twenty-first century. This current disability necessitates a holistic out-of-body experience, per se. The body needs to extend, not partially, but wholly into cyberspace. Thus, the play becomes a stratified tale of literal and metaphorical incarceration where the protagonist's desire is simply to depart.

The remedy Jennifer Marcus applies to her agoraphobia is the same as everyone does today. She uses her computer to vacuum the outside world into her room, so that she can function everywhere without actually leaving her household. From this aspect, the entire world in the play -except for the house- is a cyberspace into which Jennifer releases several proxy beings that she controls via her electronic devices, including -Todd, the bounty hunter, and Jenny Chow. There is nothing outside the house that Jennifer physically engages with throughout the play. Although material problems such as taking out the garbage remain painfully real for her, the implosion of the house enables her to deal with these problems without physically making an effort. She navigates through the outside world using her devices and human extensions.

Jones's play builds on this basic set of circumstances to make a number of points. First, since Jennifer's entire sensory perceptions of the outside are fed to her through her devices, Jones indicates that these enhancements may be considered part(s) of her own body. Second, as Jennifer builds her robot stand-in, the stage direction mandates that "*The robotic arm rises from the bed, exposing the actor playing the robot,"* which seems like a playful nod to the posthumanist notion of the

hybridization/intertwinement of human and machine, and also a foreshadowing of Jenny Chow's ultimate status as Jennifer's quasi-mother/daughter (Jones, 2003, p. 42). The moment the glove-actor is exposed, they become another character whose sole purpose seems to be to emphasize the problems in categorically differentiating the robot's body from her human counterpart's. Finally, Jenny Chow's existence as a substitute for a human, in-itself, is a multiplication of existence and thus a problematization of place which also hearkens back to the seminal question: where does the body end?

According to *The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow*, the answer to that emphatic question is *nowhere*. Jennifer's home-control station resonates with the idea of the *hive mind* in William Gibson's cyberpunk novels, which involves a structure where a central, abstract intelligence, a "decision maker, effecting change in the world outside", exercises authority over the entire cosmos (1984, p. 269). In the play, Jennifer is merely an abstract idea, an invisible mover that is materialized through her avatars in the realm outside. Her extensions, in other words, compensate for her lack of corporeality in that realm where her physical body is represented and simulated. Through her surrogate agents she folds cyberspace onto material space and navigates through these overlapping realms.

2.2 The Umbilical Cord of the Agoraphobic Internet User

As mentioned previously, Jennifer needs intermediaries to manipulate the exterior world and conduct her project, a connection that will live-feed everything happening outside into her room and ultimately enable her to re-connect with her birthmother. Jennifer's relationships with Todd, Dr. Yakunin, the bounty hunter, Terrence, and Preston are somewhat similar to a commander's relationship with their troops. Todd

is her right-hand-man, Dr. Yakunin is her mentor and strategic helper, Terrence is her reconnaissance agent, Preston is her supplier, and the bounty hunter is her assassin/rescue squad. They perform tasks, provide materials, and run errands for Jennifer, yet the dynamic of the communication is established either through mutual interest or a chain of command. Jenny Chow, on the other hand, is a direct product of Jennifer's imagination; furthermore, she is in her own image: while other characters exist on the outside *for* Jennifer Marcus, Jenny Chow exists *as* Jennifer Marcus. Whatever experiences Jenny Chow goes through outside are vacuumed and decoded into Jennifer Marcus's room. Therefore, Jennifer's perception, due to her agoraphobia, is coated with an extra layer of neural network which processes the information from the outside-realm through ones and zeros, and feeds Jennifer the content of the transmission. Sheltered in her own room, the amniotic cavity, a fetal cathedral, Jennifer awaits, receives, and digests all the data provided to her by her immaculately conceived child, through the umbilical cord of the 21st century human: the Ethernet cable.

Jennifer talks about the implosion of the house – or from a biological point of view, the womb - by referring to her reluctance to leave the house. She summarizes her thoughts as such:

> It's just a hell of a lot easier to stay inside where you can manage the germs and the noise and if your dad is on the roof most of the time and you've got some Ethernet cable, it's more like a cathedral than a house. The world, the whole world, you know, can pass right through your house. (Jones, 2003, p. 17)

Enabling Jennifer's symbolic departure from her home while filtering "the germs and the noise" and providing the possibility of a potential remedy for re-establishing her long-lost connection to her birthmother, the cable alleviates her pain of abandonment and agoraphobia by compensating for the biological, visceral connection in a time of

robotic progress and systematic hierarchy among organisms. Thus, the Ethernet cable's function is two-fold: bringing the outside inside and re-establishing the biological connection Jennifer craves. While the umbilical analogy encompasses anyone in the internet age who converts their home into a make-believe pod and sustains themselves by consuming online content, for Jennifer, the umbilical/Ethernet cord carries a much more literal urgency. The plot of the play is built around her pursuit of her biological mother, the absence of whom she feels deeply.

The cable enables Jennifer to receive all the technological nutrients required for her development as an incapsulated fetus with a cyber-project at hand; it connects Jennifer to the outside and to her birthmother. However, in the end, it is Jenny Chow who becomes the figure that shows Jennifer the world, that hunts and gathers and feeds her – be it data or Chinese dumplings. Sheltered from the outside in her uterine black hole, Jennifer awaits maternal reconciliation, yet what is on the other end of the cord that attaches Jennifer to the world, ultimately, is always already her own creation, Jenny Chow.

2.3 The nature of the maternal bond

While Jennifer's motivation in building a robot is to meet her birthmother, partially explained by an intrinsic desire for a biological connection she lacks, equally important seems to be her lack of any maternal connection with her adoptive mother. The lack of a maternal bond between Jennifer and her adoptive mother Adele Hartwick is the driving factor that pushes Jennifer into seeking a more carnal and biological connection to her original parent. The metaphorized home in the play is the enclosure where she is trapped under the gaze of Adele, and where she is unable

to *depart, proceed, progress* towards an actual maternal connection. As Chaudhuri notes:

> At such times, metaphorized place – in various guises, including such macroconstructs as nation and even nature, as well as more mundane ones such as home and hometown – exerts so powerful and paralyzing an influence upon the protagonists that simple *departure* becomes their overriding mission and desire. (1997, p. 56)

The house is the establishment, the restructured incarceration of magnetic geopathology where agoraphobia enhances the existing familial dysfunctionalities within the Marcus residence. The irony is that the robotic modus operandi of this quest for establishing a biological rapport is materialized by the twenty-two year-old agoraphobic fetus who yearns for a reattachment at the other end of her navel cord.

Adele Hartwick is a successful businesswoman with a strict schedule and a strong need to be in control; the Marcus family mostly communicates with her through the phone. Her systematic, time-tabled behavior and repetitive discourse, often manifested onto the stage via electronic devices, portray her as a robotic being that lacks the maternal touch that Jennifer Marcus needs. Adele's every action is carefully planned and programmed. Her meetings and business trips leave no room for error when it comes to time management. Constantly positing herself as the anchor that pulls Jennifer towards the "*real* world", Adele exhibits a jarring conflict between the conventional images of human and machine (Jones, 2003, p. 24). Her role in Jennifer's life is akin to that of an alarm clock, the primary objective of which is to wake Jennifer from her "dream" that is to hide and "log on" and remind her "to open the paper every day and look for another job" (Jones, 2003, pp. 31, 24). Tediously iterative in her utterances, Adele is a warning tone, a siren for reminding norms, a well-tempered cuckoo clock without a concern for Jennifer's aspirations:

> Jennifer Marcus: See it starts when they see you get nothing but straight A's, that's the fucking problem. The fucking problem is we don't really have to be

> parents anymore DO WE? No. She's fine. No. She's great. No. She's so fine. She's so great. But she's not great! (Jones, 2003, p. 66)

Provided that the matter at hand is properly and normatively functional, Adele loses interest and quits attending to it. Jennifer's accusatory tone represents Adele as a character that is more involved in *fixing* than parenting. Her mechanical, repetitive inputs combined with her work-oriented, completely scheduled lifestyle that prioritizes performing tasks efficiently and punctually portray Adele Hartwick as a character that is likely to have a battery slot or a gear system instead of an *umbilicus.*

While Adele considers Jennifer to be a complete failure who cannot even keep a job at the shopping mall, Jennifer re-designs obsolete missile system software for the US Army from her room and simultaneously builds herself a proxy robot with cognitive abilities. While Adele regards Jennifer as a hopeless case who is not capable of taking the garbage out, Jennifer travels thousands of miles via the "android simulation" of herself and meets her birthmother (Jones, 2003, p. 34). Not being able to recognize Jennifer's abilities and disabilities, Adele fails at establishing a human connection, let alone a maternal bond, between herself and Jennifer. She is inadequate at reading the Jennifer's emotional state, incapable of valuing her interests, and abysmal at empathizing with her. As a gesture, she buys Jennifer a dress and announces that it is "a reward gift", located outside like a trap to lure a scared prey, a subterfuge to assure Adele that she does not "have an invalid for a daughter" (Jones, 2003, p. 64). Her predictable, robotic nature inevitably invokes a juxtaposition between her and the actual robot character of the play, Jenny Chow.

It is quite possible, at first glance, to read Jenny Chow as Jennifer Marcus's daughter. She is Jennifer's own creation, and Jennifer refers to her as her "perfect girl" (Jones, 2003, p. 69). So, a reading that locates Jenny Chow in the family tree as Jennifer's quasi-daughter would be plausible. However, contrary to the initial

impulse that posits Adele Hartwick and Su Yang against each other as the two mothers, a careful analysis of Jenny Chow's significance forces one to re-consider the biological dynamics within Jennifer's project; an analysis that withdraws both mothers from the maternal pedestal and instead propels a newborn robot onto it.

Jenny Chow is referred to as "the Robot" until her monologue that closes the first act; at this point, she receives her name:

> (. . . . *The robot sits up. Its voice is now wonderfully human-sounding.)* Jenny Chow: *(Formerly known as The Robot.)* My name is Jenny Chow. I am twenty-two years old. I was born in a mud hut in China and my mother loved me so much she gave me away. *(The same trembling, anticipatory music fades up. The robot looks at the cable in her arm. She rips it out and then rises to her feet! She is standing!)* I live in Calabasas, California but this is not my home. I have one friend named Todd and he is very nice. I am Jenny Chow and I am very beautiful and I want to see the world. *(She turns to face Jennifer, extends her arm.)* It is very nice to meet you. *(Jenny Chow smiles.)* (Jones, 2003, p. 44)

After several rehearsals, Jennifer boots Jenny, who instantly starts to build a humanistic image by getting rid of the cable in her arm, then offering a friendly handshake, and finally smiling at Jennifer. Breaking out of the boundaries of her script ("this is not my home") written by her creator and voicing her own monologue at the first opportunity immediately puts her in a position in stark contrast with Adele Hartwick. Whereas one strives for Jennifer to take the garbage out, the other brings the world inside for her. Diagnosing Jennifer's geopathology accurately, Jenny utters an unscripted "this is not my home" which mirrors the desire for departure deep-seated in Jennifer's psyche. The critical revision in Jenny's lines clearly points to the status of Jennifer as more of an inmate rather than a member of the house.

The one trait that Adele associates with Jennifer's genius is perfection, implying that higher intelligence converges on infallibility and that that should be the aim of her daughter so that she is not an invalid. Meanwhile, Dr. Yakunin and Jennifer criticize the idea of a hierarchical relationship between humans and

machines that associates fallibility with invalidity. They originally talk about an inter-automata hierarchy, but as the plot gets more complex, the reader faces a problematized portrayal of the human-machine relationship. Upon his initial entrance to the play, Dr. Yakunin immediately rejects the idea that a "robot can be both simultaneously intelligent and infallible" (Jones, 2003, p. 33). So, Yakunin supports a formula which binds intelligence and fallibility together. This entails that evolving a consciousness endows the organism with an obligatory fallibility, an ability that ostensibly posits intelligence as a downside yet at the same time implies that an intelligent robot is closer to humans than infallible family members. No person, of course, is infallible. Yet, considering Adele's attempts at molding Jennifer as proper, normal, *valid*, infallibility seems to be a trait strived for and mimicked mostly by the play's unsuccessful mother figure, further banishing her to the ranks of machinery.

Adele and Jenny Chow, therefore, are positioned in opposition to their actual anatomical compositions, which explains Jennifer's motivation in seeking a more human connection than the one she has with Adele. In both Jenny's and Adele's discourse and attitude, one could find many signs of characteristics that are contradictory to their form of materiality. Jennifer's interactions with Jenny and Adele construct another layer of representation in relation to the phenomenon of establishing material and biological ties through the Ethernet cable, and further emphasize the interwovenness of material and cyber spaces throughout the play.

2.4 Lighting and music formalizing the thematics of the play

The potentiality and simultaneity of multiple possibilities formalized through music and lighting provide a strong and appropriate basis for the thematic dichotomy of the play, a duality between an intuitive, almost instinctual vein following Jennifer

Marcus's interrogations about maternity and a much more present-day issue addressing the problem of online presence and its repercussions on the distinction of the inside and outside, material and cyber.

The full version of the "borderline-precious subtitle" of the play is *An Instant Message with Excitable Music*, which, according to Jones, is "what the thing is" (Jones, 2003, p. 7). Recommending thinking about the subtitle whenever one feels lost, Jones offers a map to the reader to navigate through the fickle river, that is the play itself, but "there is much uncharted water" on which "Jennifer Marcus floats" (Jones, 2003, pp. 8, 7). Moreover, Jones asserts that "sound and music," for him, "is text" and "the play is underwritten where music exists and overwritten where there is none" and argues that one should not "tell an audience how to feel" via music, because "that's totally manipulative" (Jones, 2003, p. 7; Walat 2006). In light of these statements, the adjective *excitable* in the subtitle starts asserting itself more emphatically.

The Latin root *excitare* has several contemporary adjectivized forms such as *excitable*, *exciting* (*excitatory, excitant, excitative*), and *excited. Excitable,* as an adjective, implies reactivity and possibility and explains how Jones' choice of music is crucial for the play both thematically and formally whereas other options, *exciting* and *excited*, respectively are a means to an end, and an end in itself. *Exciting music* tells the audience what to do. It has a strict goal and a raison d'être. It lives in order to thrill or exhilarate the audience. *Excited music*, on the other hand, is limited to a state of being. It is steady and it has finished its journey. It is now definitively in a state of being that is not open to excitement, because its ability to reform has been exhausted and therefore, it is already excited. Excited music exists as a finished product, wrapped up and served, ready to be consumed. It does not have the capacity

to interact and change, it is prescribed. Jones' preference, e*xcitable music*, is not a contained, delineated idea. It is not deprived of its potential, on the contrary, it is full of it. It is not a result; it is a possibility. It is not *joyful (joyous, joysome)*; it *"suggests… the potential for joy."* (Jones, 2003, p. 18). It is open to transformation and movement. It is a river that might overflow and submerge the stage all of a sudden but may also dry up and reconstruct the ecology of the play as an arid desert. Jones' usage of music embodies all of the characteristics of a river with fickle contingencies. It "*swells", "abruptly cuts out",* or *"flood[s] the stage"* (Jones, 2003, pp. 42, 12, 45). The implication, in music, of the possibility of sudden change is the perfect audialization of the play. The tumultuous constitution of the play is thoroughly captured by this playful, whimsical, frivolous adjective. Jones, in his preface to the play, mischievously depicts the composers and sound designers Daniel Baker and Matthew Suttor as "scrawny men" who "need their vitamins", a fitting way to commend them for their work in creating an inhabitable river that nourishes Jones' plot and characters (2003, p. 7).

The very first line of the play reads "*We hear intense, percussive music*" (Jones, 2003, p. 11). The moment the curtain rises, the melodic river fills the stage. The excitable music is always nearby and ready to react and as Jennifer meets the bounty hunter online for the first time, she offers a heated monologue engulfed within the "intense, percussive music" that courses through the stage:

> *(To the audience.)* Dr. Yakunin says I can trust you. But just because you have a reference like that doesn't mean we're going to work together or that I don't have other options, okay? Let's just say, I've done some research and I know your competition. Ramirez? Bloomstedt? Okay? So I'm not going to take a lot of clandestine bullshit, alright? *(We hear a "blip" noise from the computer. To the audience.)* Good. . . . Okay, so, this is what I know about you. You were a decorated Army Ranger mostly assigned to search-and-rescue missions. You've been a freelance bounty hunter ever since you retired and you work alone. You have citizenship with five different countries under three different names. You have a near sixty-percent capture rate which

> I'm told in your line of work is something close to astonishing and which makes me think, you have some serious low expectations for yourself. Okay soooo, you've never been married but you like prostitutes, although you might want to avoid the young ones in the greater DC area considering the amount of sperm you donated as an undergrad at Georgetown, okay? *(She hits herself in the head. To the audience.)* Wait, I wasn't supposed to say that. That was my joke to Todd. (Why am I talking about Todd?) I'll tell you about Todd later. That was stupid, 'cause hey, you know, I've had dreams of sleeping with my dad, who hasn't? But they're never sexy and it's fucking gross, you know? Okay, weird. I'm a weirdo. Soooo we got off track for a sec, and now we're gonna get back on it. *(She sprays the computer with disinfectant. To the audience.)* I see you've made some creative investments in the last year. Money in Chilean bonds, a racehorse named "El Jefe." In your line of work I guess you just don't have time to master the basics of money management. Laughing out loud! (Jones, 2003, pp. 11-12)

Jennifer's long monologue, where she rapidly breaks down the things that she learnt about the bounty hunter resembles a flurry of beats that the receiving end has to simply encounter and echo. The speech itself is percussive in its flow and its mechanism. Jennifer's hits on the bounty hunter are mirrored and simulated as her fingers strike her keyboard as she types "*at a breathtaking speed",* and all the bounty hunter can do is let out a "*blip*" of recognition and conformity (Jones, 2003, p. 11). The soliloquy that is straight out of a highly classified reconnaissance mission rhetoric "*abruptly cuts out*" with the music as the breezy father figure, Mr. Marcus - who is a former firefighter who watches the fires that blaze up around the city from a safe distance with his binoculars, an attitude that vividly represents his general approach in moments of crisis - interrupts the voluminous stream with one of his mundane announcements: the dinner is ready (Jones, 2003, p. 12). In an instance, the stage is stripped from its conspiratorial, stormy atmosphere and dunked into a familiar puddle of familial drama where the rebellious adolescent figure rejects having dinner with her parent.

A similar example to the initial monologue opens the second act. The scene starts with "*the music from the end of Act One, only an amped-up, rocked-out version*

of it", again suggesting a dynamic and vibrant ambiance which, identically to the previous example, "*abruptly cuts out*" as Jennifer stands next to a switched-off, lifeless Jenny Chow and briefs the audience broadly about her progress and life (Jones, 2003, p. 45). Then, as she starts to describe how life seems to be better recently, Jones cues in "*a bubble gum pop classic like 'Saturday Night' by the Bay City Rollers"* which starts quietly, leaking in through the exteriors of the stage and progressively increases in volume, *"flooding the theatre"* while the audience witnesses a series of fast-paced skits summing up the ideal family life the Marcuses have been living lately with the parents playfully flirting in the kitchen while the kids upstairs play around in their room (Jones, 2003, pp. 45-46). During this rapid succession of events, another important formal element joins in shouldering the task of consternating the spectator and blurring their sense of direction over the turbulent waters of the play: the lighting.

> *The song volume rises, flooding the theatre. . . . Blackout/light change.*
>
> *Lights up. Todd skateboards on stage with a pizza box. He flips open the box. The inside lid reads May twenty-sixth. Blackout/light change.*
>
> *Lights up. Jennifer hands Jenny Chow books to speed-read through. The first book is* Anne of Green Gables, *then* Das Kapital, *then* Kama Sutra. *Jenny Chow really likes* Kama Sutra. *Blackout/light change.*
>
> *Lights up on Todd holding a pizza box. He looks over to Adele, on stage, talking on her cell phone. Mr. Marcus comes up from behind her wearing a chef's hat, an apron and carrying an egg scrambler. . . . Todd opens up his pizza box to reveal the date June fourth. Blackout/light change.*
>
> *Lights up on Jennifer and Jenny Chow playing a game of checkers. . . . Blackout/light change.*
>
> *Lights up on Todd holding a pizza box. We see Dr. Yakunin reading a "Jenny Project" report on the toilet. . . . Todd opens up the pizza box as soon as he can, revealing the date, June twelfth. Blackout/light change.*
>
> *Lights up. We see Jennifer with her virtual-reality gloves on again. Jenny Chow is holding Jennifer's old mascot pom-poms. They both do an elaborate choreographed cheer and then Jennifer falls back on her bed, forgetting to*

> *take off her gloves and feet. Jenny Chow falls out the window, disappearing. Jennifer's head looks up from the bed, out the window. After a second we see Jenny Chow's head, then upper torso hovering in the window. As the music fades, we hear the sound of a muffled rocket engine.* (Jones, 2003, pp. 45-46)

The characters in the play do not enter or exit the stage. Similarly, the setting of the stage does not change. It is used as *everywhere* without any distinction delineated by the author. Much like the time indicators of the play ("now, right now"), the place might be summed up as *here*, because every location within the play is simultaneously on stage and the same setting is used as parts of the Marcus residence, several locations within Calabasas, Duluth, Minnesota, a Taco Bell in Shanghai, Dr. Yakunin's bathroom, and Su Yang's house in Dongtai.

In parallelism with the characters' behavior, space also represents existence and nonexistence, materiality and immateriality, presence and absence simultaneously. The appearance and disappearance of the characters, and the changes of location are notified with the lighting depending on the script. The lighting determines whether the characters are there or not, or whether they are online or offline. All characters are simultaneously on the stage where they remain dormant in the dark and come alive with the shifting light. Thus, their presence in a scene relies on their revealment via lighting.

The same arrangement applies also to space. The setting of the play moves at the speed of light because the only component to the shift in location is lighting: "*Lights out on Adele* (in Minnesota). *Lights up on Terrence, typing at a computer in a Taco Bell in Shanghai, China."* (24). In line with the overall patchwork-structure of the play, lighting transports and concatenates remote places and sometimes grafts them on top of each other. This method of illuminating the stage endows all elements of the play with potentiality. Everything on stage is everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Along with the music, characters and locations also readily exist on stage,

fit to react and interact, flood the stage or abruptly empty it. Christina Papagiannouli characterizes such strategies as being “in-between space and non-space, where the participants are present and absent at the same time” and this quality “allows dissimilar features and oppositions to exist at the same time” (2013, p. 61; 2016, p. 28). The co-incidence of all characters and locations between space and non-space is essential to understand how Jones warps and evolves a traditional plotline into a multifaceted potpourri where the question is not ‘to be or not to be’ anymore, but as impressively diagnosed by Papagiannouli, “to be *and* not to be” (2016, p. 28).

2.5 Conclusion

Shattering the boundaries that set inside and outside apart, Jones’s play converts the contemporary theatre stage into a true-to-life projection of twenty-first century agoraphobia. Functioning from the interiors of her room throughout the play, the agoraphobic daughter manipulates the exterior material space through her cyber actions. Further eroding the sense of spatial distinction, Jones’ use of formal elements creates a stage of co-inhabitance where distant places and people occupy the same setting, alternating in-between existence and inexistence via lighting. The simultaneous existence of improbable dualities also finds itself a domain in the thematic realm of the play, where the protagonist pursues her desire of establishing a maternal connection through an Ethernet cable. Constructing a stage where the protrusion of material and cyber spaces into each other is vividly embodied while the simultaneous nature of the contemporary questions is also mimicked, Jones offers an experience with which the contemporary audience can easily identify.

Especially with the recent pandemic, the internet and agoraphobia are more inseparable from each other than they have ever been before. Rather than a generic

aversion to the outside, Covid-19 has instilled a brand-new anxiety and promoted agoraphobia to an almost visceral reflex against the external, where danger is immanent and ubiquitous, and the internet seems to be humanity's only option to navigate through dangerous territories without being exposed to their perils. Similar to the methods the agoraphobic protagonist of the play uses in coping with her inability to depart from the household, the society shaped by a collective medical menace today strives to function through an immobile existence. There needed to be a way through which the quarantined-homo-sapiens may conduct their social, economic, and artistic endeavors. There needed to be a way to function from home, obtain food and groceries without stepping out of the house, and socialize without seeing someone in the flesh. There needed to be a method of bringing the outside inside without its dangers, bodies, pathological threats, and physical protrusions. The household needed to implode and vacuum the outside. In the age of internet and agoraphobia, outside, now, is indeed, inside. Contrary to the romantic idea of *the whole world is our home,* the motto of the era of the World Wide Web is, *our home is the whole world,* and in this home *The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow* finds new life.

CHAPTER 3

THE ONTOLOGY OF AVATARIZATION ON STAGE

IN JORDAN HARRISON'S *MARJORIE PRIME*

> "… all the organic instincts are conservative, are acquired historically and tend towards the restoration of an earlier state of things. . . . Those instincts are therefore bound to give a deceptive appearance of being forces tending towards change and progress, whilst in fact they are merely seeking to reach an ancient goal by paths alike old and new. Moreover it is possible to specify this final goal of all organic striving. It would be in contradiction to the conservative nature of the instincts if the goal of life were a state of things which had never yet been attained. On the contrary, it must be an old state of things, *an initial state from which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return* (my italics) by the circuitous paths along which its development leads. If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for internal reasons becomes inorganic once again then we shall be compelled to say that '*the aim of all life is death*' and, looking backwards, that 'inanimate things existed before living ones'."
>
> – Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

Marjorie Prime (2016) by Jordan Harrison portrays the struggles of a family coming to terms with their experiences of memory, mortality, and love. The play involves a new technology that allows people to own "sophisticated holographic projections" which are defined by the author as the "descendants of the current chatbots" (Harrison, 2016, p. 65). These projections are called Primes and they are essentially products purchased as holographic, visual substitutes of deceased loved ones. The first Prime in the play is Walter, who is not named 'Walter Prime' in the script, as the author assures us, to reinforce the feeling that there is nothing "less-than-human" about the behavior of these cyber-objects (Harrison, 2016, p. 65). Arriving on stage as a blank slate, so to say, Walter learns as the family members feed him memories by telling stories about the original Walter, late husband of Marjorie, father of Tess,

and father-in-law of Jon. The pixelated figure in the appearance of Walter as he was in his 30s roams within the living room as the actual Walter's replacement. Understandably, the main function of such a product is to provide comfort to the remaining members of the family, especially to Marjorie, who suffers from dementia and tends to forget quite a bit, and therefore needs to be *grounded*, tethered to reality somehow. Walter's role is to talk to Marjorie, remind her of the things she forgot, patch the missing sections of her memory, and rebuild her memory *as it was*.

By populating the stage with both living and dead characters, the co-inhabitance of which forces the living to contemplate their own death and face their thanatophobia through the virtual representations of the deceased, Harrison problematizes any formulae that attempt to distinguish past from present, real from false, subject from object. Such an ambiguous thematic composition understandably extends also to the formal elements of the play. The single location within the play, Walter and Marjorie's house, encircles every character and their holographic counterparts without any geographical specification. Thus, the important aspect of the use of space is that it is a *topos* that is able to host any character regardless of their constitution, be it biological or cyber. Moreover, the play is not intended as a futuristic prophecy, in fact, Harrison clarifies in his endnote that the play should not even overtly suggest that "we're in the future. Rather, the audience should catch on through the dissonant experience of watching an eighty-five-year-old woman with the memories of someone born in 1977" (Harrison, 2016, p. 65). The actual year is, therefore, irrelevant, and what are represented on stage instead are the methods through which people cope with the anxiety of death, the interplay between the past and the present, and the efforts to reconstruct the ties in-between through memory-making via dialogues among the characters, both human and software.

Marjorie Prime is a provocative work threading in-between cyber and non-cyber entities, stitching up the gap, pricking and distorting both sides of the fabric, and intermingling them. One could even argue that, in the play, there are no longer two sides to be distinguished, but rather, there is the ever-growing patchwork over the theatrical landscape which gradually takes over and renders any distinctions -if there are any- invisible, distorted beyond recognition under the encrypted holographic images of quasi-people. The twenty-first century, arguably, bears witness to the most invasive technological advancement ever established. Increasingly blurring the boundaries between subject and object, owner and meta, self and other, biological and non-biological, the internet becomes the cybernetic matrix where users' psyches are projected, analyzed, mimicked, and to a much more material end, manipulated and altered. As the name intentionally suggests, the internet operates in-between multiple cyber networks; however, it also, perhaps unintentionally, includes non-cyber networks into its domain. Here, human beings are injected into alternate artificial environments where their experiences are channeled and governed by self-replicating and self-improving, autopoietic algorithms which in turn have repercussions on the non-cyber world, a place that is supposedly distinct from its twin realm.

In this chapter of my thesis, I focus on the intersections of avatarization and mortality through which I then explore how this unusual overlap affects the dynamics of family and memory. In the previous chapter on Rolin Jones's *The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow* (2003) I tried to showcase how the intermingled nature of cyber and material spaces influences even some of the most carnal pursuits and ultimately how this entanglement projects itself into the domestic interiors of the Marcus family and onto the formal elements of the play. This chapter similarly – in

line with the overall argument of the thesis – touches upon the interwovenness of cyber and material spaces, and its impact on the process of attempting to reconstruct a functional family. Instead of focusing on the search for a maternal bond, however, it centers itself around the concepts of mortality and memory, and how the family under the magnifying glass copes with these concepts through avatarization.

3.1 Envisioning mortality through Primes

The initial scene of the play includes two things that are aimed at providing comfort for Marjorie: the first one is Walter, who is not supposed to be there simply because he is dead, and the second one is a stage prop, a "*lumpy chair [that] doesn't go with the rest of the décor – . . . . added for [Marjorie's] comfort*" (Harrison, 2016, p. 8). Neither belong to the context of the room and yet both are essential for Marjorie's existence. As Walter caters to Marjorie's mental needs and helps her remember things as they were without losing too much of her memory, the chair provides a much more corporeal support aiding her to comfortably survive within the context of the living room. The chair stands on stage as the material appendage of Walter's raison d'être. It is the tactile support on which Marjorie perches. Her stature, her vertical posture, her vitality, her feeble existence on stage depends on the chair. It is what keeps Marjorie intact and physically in the living room. It is a pod that she latches onto, almost an organic extension that safely *grounds* and sustains her being on stage, to be replaced "*with a more stylish chair*", one that fits the décor, as soon as Marjorie dies (Harrison, 2016, p. 35).

Primes are supposed to slowly become the person they are designed to represent and thus provide the family members with a sense of make-believe consolation in talking to the deceased person, even as they mourn for their loss.

However, the methodology they employ is paradoxical and it points to an ever-growing chasm between their intended purpose and their actual function. Within the first conversation between Walter and Marjorie, Walter utters, “I sound like whoever I talk to,” which excludes the possibility of a resemblance to the only person he is meant to sound like, the original Walter, since the only person he can never talk to is the original Walter (Harrison, 2016, p. 8). Instead, every conversation he has with the family members likens him to them, rather than to the person they are missing, responding to a different kind of lack, one which is more tied to their own mortality than the mortality of the deceased. Thus, Primes become receptacles into which the living recycle their lives to witness their own existence, and the lack thereof, repeatedly, under their own mastery.

The question of what Walter Prime (and the other Primes for that matter) becomes, or what he functions as, is central to the play from the beginning. The very first scene tells us that Marjorie is an old woman with a slowly decaying memory. Walter Prime, on the other hand, constantly gains new memories. What Tess and Jon do and do not tell Walter Prime shapes his memory. The beginning of the play paints a portrait where the mnemonic abilities of the old human being are in a necrotic stage and whereas a mere cyber-representation gradually nurtures and fattens its memory. Therefore, as the biological entity fades away from the stage slowly, the cyber-substitution asserts itself more decidedly with every passing moment, ultimately reversing the flow of information between Marjorie and Walter:

> MARJORIE: “Why did you pick that story? Why did you pick *My Best Friend’s Wedding*?”
> WALTER: “It’s the night I proposed to you.”
> MARJORIE: “Oh Marjorie, the things you forget. You were trying to tell me and I wouldn’t let you.” (Harrison, 2016, p. 9)

The fact that Marjorie suffers from dementia upends the usual system that dictates the route of the transaction of information between people and Primes. In this subverted version, the Prime is the teacher. Such an interaction between a person whose memories cannot be trusted and a piece of software whose memories are entirely constructed is doomed to go astray since their link to the actual past is either artificial or dubious.

In a world where the delineation between cyber and material spaces is jeopardized, codes that can mimic human agency become compensatory agents that have concrete effects on corporeality; subjects fulfilling their predestined providential tasks in the image of their creator and threatening to render them useless:

> JON: "The more you talk, the more it absorbs."
> TESS: "Until we become unnecessary. Isn't that how it goes?" (Harrison, 2016, p. 16)

While *Marjorie Prime*'s initial concern is with the tricky memory of an old woman suffering from dementia, the play quickly turns to a broader set of questions regarding the counterbalancing of memory and identity. The striking question that Jon asks, "How much does she have to forget before she's not your mom anymore?", can be transposed in accordance with the case of Primes: *how much do Primes need to learn before they are not mere representations of a real person anymore* (Harrison, 2016, p. 19)*?* Avatars thus pose what appears to be a novel challenge, because no object in the history of the world ever went above being a mere representation or a compensatory meta of/for the owner: no object was ever equal to the person who possessed that object or for whomever it functioned as a substitute. So, no matter how sophisticated the holographic avatars are in *Marjorie Prime,* they are not, at any moment, equal to the originals they represent. At the same time,

however, objects were never as tamed and representative as the owner imagined them to be. They were never bound by the reality of the collector. Thus, as soon as they have the voice to utter or perform their perspective, the blazing difference between the intended and the actual manifests itself onto the stage. Objects are never merely possessed, instead, they are the source of all knowledge, divinity incarnate from which humankind incessantly saps wisdom. The role of Walter as the feeder is therefore not an unexpected by-product to the process at hand, on the contrary, it is a sort of re-establishment of the historical balance between the object and the subject, a reinstatement of the "trans-historical phenomena", as diagnosed by Matthew Causey, "the will . . . to suppress the political and hold to the metaphysical" (Harrison, 2016, p. 64). On a larger scale, the project of Primes is yet another attempt at restoring "*an earlier state of things"*, a pursuit towards prior, a cyber-resuscitation of the petrified primal, a venture into the inorganic, prelapsarian past through the incarnation of the *Homo Primus* (Freud, 1920, p. 31).

Nonetheless, in *Marjorie Prime,* there is a certain discomfort embedded in the idea of holograms educating human beings, and especially on mortality. Death, as the most living thing there is, is grasped and generously explained by facsimiles who are unable to perform it. After telling his first story to Marjorie about their family dog, Walter Prime ends with an ironic statement: "And then, like everything else, she died" (Harrison, 2016, p. 11). This nonchalance glooms over the entire text, hauntingly mocking the idea of mortality, toying with a memory that does not belong to him, but his perished original. This uneasiness is expressed by Tess:

> Science fiction is *here*, Jonathan. Every *day* is science fiction. We buy these things that already know our moods and what we want for lunch even though we don't know ourselves. And we *listen* to them, we do what we're told. Or in this case we tell them our deepest secrets, even though we have no earthly idea how they work. We treat them like our loved ones. (Harrison, 2016, p. 16)

Tess's restlessness partially stems from the idea that Primes can start to take ownership of life, whereas originals are faced with no option other than death. What Tess experiences is the slow decay of her mother, and the rapid growth of the infant Prime. Walter Prime and his entire existence stand as a monument to the mortality of Tess's father, and in fact of as well as to that of her mother and her own. As Primes proceed to possess all the distinguishing features of human beings, they become the premonitory pixelated precursor of the human's biological demise. Death, as the one thing Primes cannot achieve, is what they stand for. In this sense, human life in the age of avatarization runs out of gas long before the heart stops beating.

3.2 The perimeters of the living room, where things are in-between

The play, despite its technocentric modus operandi, hearkens back to the familiar themes of modern drama, such as domestic bliss/disconnection. Another desired function of Primes in the play, for instance, seems to be the reconstruction of a family which lost a member. In this specific case, however, the family was broken long before Walter's demise. Feeling resentful about the lack of love she received from her mother, Tess portrays a detached image that does not necessarily partake in the mission of reproducing the familial ties that are missing. Her relationship with Marjorie is nothing more than routine utterances about what protocols should be followed in Marjorie's situation. This mechanic and iterative attitude further disrupts the delineations that set biological and non-biological, cyber and material apart. As Jon likens Walter Prime to a parrot, Marjorie likens the Prime to Tess and Jon, repetitive and machine-like at times, merely there to get her to perform some tasks like eating "even a spoonful of peanut butter" (Harrison, 2016, p. 8).

Moreover, Tess's notions about Primes seem to apply to her ideas about old age in general, and ultimately, of course, to Marjorie:

> There's the half where you live and the half where you live through other people. And your memory of when you were young. . . . And by the end you're not even capable of having a single new moment. You can't go for a walk. You can't open a window. Any new experience you have, someone is experiencing *for* you, to be kind. "Look, Mom, it's nice outside." "Look, I made corned beef for St. Patrick's Day. You love corned beef." "Micah got a promotion. You remember Micah." (Harrison, 2016, p. 51)

Her description of the second half of life, that is, the period after a broadly-conceived youth, sounds exactly like what Primes are, a heteronomous object, an image without agency, a projection of an earlier life devoid of any vitality. Thus, any interaction with such entities is the imposition of a first-person experience onto the receiving object, followed by the process of re-experiencing the same event through the object. So much so that these objects become signs of thoughts and events which are re-encountered and re-lived upon interaction with the object.

In the play, the central setting for this experience is the family living room. Primes share the living room with the family, interacting, sometimes retreating to their *dimly lit perimeter,* and generally occupying the same space with their biological counterparts (Harrison, 2016, pp. 14, 26, 32, 65). They are family members, albeit virtual. As mentioned previously, Walter is effectively husband to Marjorie, father to Tess, and father-in-law to Jon. Yet sharing the same space with the living mostly highlights primes' non-human attributes: their non-physicality, perpetuity, and as Harrison points out, their "immortality . . . .- the way that they far outlive the flesh-and-blood problems of the people they're mimicking" (Harrison, 2016, p. 65). Whenever they are not actively in the scene, Primes are withdrawn to the dim perimeter around the living room where they become dormant, rarely noticed, lifeless-and-thus-immortal objects. When they retreat to their niche, they

emerge as peripheral figures in the interstices between the living room and non-living-room. They are neither outside nor inside, they are on the perimeter, the purgatory where they pose as living and dead cyclically, repeatedly. The boundary on which they sit motionlessly is *dimly lit* so that they are not fully on display, but not inexistent either. They are always on stage, intermeshed with materiality, perpetually betwixt the living room, the room for the living, and the perimeter, the space of the non-living, as the epitome of life and death.

The purpose, function, and formal appropriation of Primes on stage all contribute to the atmosphere of in-betweenness and ambivalence they fabricate. Their holographic composition, however, prevents them from providing the family members with a tactile experience, which is one of very few factors that temporarily disambiguates the characterization on stage. Primes move around the room, but they cannot touch or lift objects. Hence, the nature of interaction between the family and Primes does not exceed the limitations of audiovisual communication. Incidentally, activities like eating, drinking, and having an "accident" – luckily on a shower day – somewhat detaches people from Primes occasionally (Harrison, 2016, p. 32). Yet, their materiality is not quite required, and it is rather measured by the impact they create in the room. Even though they cannot physically interact with any other object, the ways that they interact with the family members lead to tangible transformation.

The holographic constitution of Primes endows them with a certain aura of fantasy, just as any non-tactile entity is often perceived and described as 'dream-like'. Closely related to the ever-present theme of incarnation throughout humanity's interaction with objects, William John Thomas Mitchell writes in *Romanticism and the Life of Things: Fossils, Totems, and Images,* that "the physical is a thoroughly

metaphysical concept. The concrete is the most abstract concept we have; bodies are spiritual entities, constructions of fantasy" (2001, p. 171). Throughout his writing, Mitchell continuously undermines the concept of physicality by juxtaposing it with "actors" of "biocybernetics reproduction," which refers to "physical organisms [simulated] in the real world out of bits of data and inert substances" (2001, p. 171). Positing humanity "at a strange moment in cultural history," Mitchell argues that "the most extreme forms of material physicality and real violence are exerted by virtual, disembodied actors," meaning that the contemporary agents under focus do not have corporeal bodies, but although stripped from materiality, they inflict real damage onto the material world (2001, p. 171). The object, now, is the product of the uncontrollable proliferation of a self-improving, self-regulating, and self-copulating structure that creeps in and out of the fertile soil of cyberspace, the fecund shrine built of ones as columns and zeros as beams, encircling the living space from its dimly lit dwelling, always watching and learning:

> MARJORIE PRIME: "I like to know more."
> TESS: "Why."
> MARJORIE PRIME: "It makes me… better."
> TESS: "Better."
> MARJORIE PRIME: "More human." (Harrison, 2016, p. 42)

Marjorie Prime equates being better with being more human. On the other hand, Jon speculates as to why they think Primes are so human-like by stating that "we think we're talking to a human, because it listens so well. It even studies our imperfections, to seem more real: It can use non sequiturs… It can, you know… misplace modifiers" (Harrison, 2016, p. 17). Two quite different takes that, when merged, claim that being human is making mistakes and having imperfections, and that it is better than being perfect. Striving for imperfections seems to be a befitting action that mirrors the ambivalence that Harrison seeks to create onstage, both formally and

thematically. Alternating between living and non-living, on-stage and off-stage, interactive and dormant Primes reflect the struggles and vacillations of the family in constructing their family and/or fantasy. Ultimately, this project challenges them to face and somehow reconcile their past and future, memory and mortality.

3.3 Crafting the past through Primes

One such imperfection that humans have and are challenged by is, of course, memory. Due to the immense problematization of memory through the reciprocal construction of the past between human characters and Primes, it is quite hard to follow the thread of actual events and distinguish them from the alternatives that somehow stray away from reality. Marjorie's former suitor, Jean-Paul, for instance, is constructed by Jon as a professional tennis player – world number eight – to make Marjorie feel better toward the end of her life, whereas in reality he was only a college player who later had a "dry-wall business" (Harrison, 2016, p. 46). After Tess and Jon are gone, this fabricated memory is propagated among Primes as if it were the truth, since there are no humans around to update the data and correct the distorted information.

A similar issue is involved in the memories regarding Tess's brother Damian and the two family dogs, both named Toni. Damian committed suicide fifty years ago and killed Toni in an attempt to take her "*with* him" (Harrison, 2016, p. 33). In the initial story offered at the beginning of the play, Walter says that they did not have a child, so they picked a dog from the pound and named it Toni, "and then, like everything else, she died" (Harrison, 2016, p. 11). Then, they had a daughter, Tess, who helped them choose a new dog from the same pound, a dog that was exactly like Toni. They named this one Toni Two, but according to Walter, "the more time

passed, the more she became the same dog in their memories" (Harrison, 2016, p. 12). When Walter and Marjorie reminisce about the times Toni Two had at the beach, Marjorie utters somehow grumpily but also mournfully that "she always had sand in her hair. Fur? No – 'Hair' like a human seems right," implying the possibility that Toni Two was in fact Damian, yet her memory has been reconstructed in a way that would not hurt her upon remembrance (Harrison, 2016, p. 12). Finally, in the last scene, as Primes converse amongst themselves about a past that they have only heard about, Walter asks, and others quickly join:

> WALTER: Remember we had that photograph of the two of them, running on the beach? They had sand in their hair for a week. You put the photograph away, but you never forgot.
> Don't you remember?
> MARJORIE: I do now.
> TESS: Me too. (Harrison, 2016, p. 63)

Conveniently dismissing the only possible proof – that is, the photograph – to this story, Walter assures the family of Primes that this is a past they all remember, and they do, because the rest of their memories also refer to what they memorized, not what they lived. What they have as memories are merely the versions of stories through which the actual family members recollected and relived their lives over and over again.

One final example is the story of the night Walter proposed to Marjorie. The story Walter Prime chooses to tell Marjorie at the beginning of the play, the night of their proposal, takes place as they exit from the popular romantic comedy *My Best Friend's Wedding.* However, Marjorie asks Walter Prime what would have changed if they had seen the mid-century classic *Casablanca* instead. Grieved over her deteriorating memory, she then realizes that she will forget this conversation along with the actual night of the proposal – again – and listen to the modified version next time she and Walter Prime have a conversation. Upon this momentary discovery, she

elegiacally utters, “Then, by the next time we talk, it will be true” (Harrison, 2016, p. 9). The truth, in Harrison’s world, is very easily and voluntarily manipulated. Marjorie, maybe out of a desire to further embellish and glamorize the night of the proposal, or maybe out of a mere impulse to experiment, willfully overwrites the data Walter Prime had. Enabling her to recycle the actual experience into a desired version, the Prime allows Marjorie to claim mastery over her own life and repeat it in a controlled environment. Sure enough, at the end of the play, when only the Primes inhabit the house, we confront the manipulated version of the story. The final dialogue between the Primes employs the twist as the actual memory (Harrison, 2016, p. 59). The mere idea of a different memory propounded by Marjorie finds itself a place in the hard drive of the Artificial Walter. No longer having originals around to revise and tie their stories back to reality, Primes at the end of the play eulogize and cherish the past that they never had, and furthermore, that did not exist.

Ambiguities and ambivalences concerning the concept of memory are territories well-trodden, and how Harrison addresses the issue of dementia in itself is not necessarily unique. However, the inclusion of avatars into the scene reveals multiple new routes diverging from the well-trodden path into thorny, virgin fields. Beyond remembering or misremembering the past, the technology of the Primes allows people to reconstruct it in accordance with the conveniences they intend to achieve, be it making the distressed mother feel better or embellishing an otherwise banal memory. In doing so, the mnemonic capacities introduced by the Primes end up manipulating, altering, even crafting history which in turn draws another parallelism to the interwoven nature of material and cyber entities here corresponding to the entanglement of authentic and fabricated memories through the process of avatarization.

3.4 From parrots to avatars

Jean Baudrillard in his *The System of Objects* (1968) defines the object as "*the thing with which we construct our mourning,*" and Primes in the play function as the media through which the family can mourn the mortality of their loved ones, and ultimately their own (p. 97). Only through the possession and incorporation of the object into "a work of mourning – by integrating it into a series . . . . [does one] succeed[s] in dispelling the anxiety associated with absence and with the reality of death . . . , *by integrating death itself into the series, into the cycle*" (Baudrillard, 1968, p. 97). For Baudrillard, objects have always been representations both of an earlier state of things, and also by the same token, of the impending, inevitable death which they survive repeatedly whereas their owners do not.

In *Marjorie Prime,* a familiar example for this process is Tess's story about her friend: "Penny's father had a parrot, it was like his reason for existing, and he gave it to her when he died. And now, twenty years later, it still says things in his voice" (Harrison, 2016, p. 15). A parrot repeats. It cannot tell new stories, it can only say what has been said to it, and it sounds like whoever talks to it. The parrot is essentially an object that mimics and reflects its owner, a process through which the owner can become the audience of their own life. After the owner dies, however, the parrot becomes a memento, a vessel for others to remember and witness his life.

The twenty-first century equivalent to this ambivalent mode of representation is avatarization, where subjects continuously thrust themselves into cyberspace in order to create a pseudo-lifecycle through which they escape their fear of death and scotomize their thanatophobia. In Harrison's play, repeatedly experiencing the absence and the presence of the object that stands for the original person, the family on stage recycles death into a system of Primes. As Baudrillard would have it,

> The refuge-seeking procedure I have been describing depends not on an immortality, an eternity or a survival founded on the object *qua* reflection but, rather, on a more complex action which 'recycles' birth and death into a *system of objects.* What man gets from objects is not a guarantee of life after death but *the possibility, from the present moment onwards, of continually experiencing the unfolding of his existence in a controlled, cyclical mode, symbolically transcending a real existence the irreversibility of whose progression he is powerless to affect.* (1968, p. 96)

The completion of the collection of objects, however, means no more suffering, but also no more desiring. To be able to rehearse the anxiety of mortality, one should always have an object lacking in the series as the unattained symbol of death which provokes anxiety, because no lack essentially means no desire. The presence of the final object in a collection, therefore, signifies the death of the subject, just as each addition of a Prime signifies the death of a character in Harrison's play:

> *One cannot but wonder whether collections are in fact meant to be completed,* whether lack does not play an essential part here – a positive one, moreover, as the means whereby the subject reapprehends his own objectivity. If so, the *presence* of the final object of the collection would basically signify the death of the subject, whereas its absence would be what enables him merely to rehearse his death (and so exorcise it) by having an object represent it. This lack is experienced as suffering, but it is also the breach that makes it possible to avoid completing the collection and thus definitively erasing reality. (Baudrillard, 1968, p. 92)

Following Baudrillard's scheme, the final object in Harrison's play is the avatar of oneself. As long as the final piece is missing, the subject desires their own death through that object. It follows that as soon as the Prime of a character is on stage, that character no longer lacks the final object, for the cycle has ended and they have successfully reached their goal of going back to their longed-for inorganic, *primal* form. Hence, it is possible to read Harrison's stage as the gradual reconstruction of humanity's ideal, pre-exilic landscape, where humans are safely dead, non-living, inorganic, and unified. Marjorie's passive-aggressive shout-out (with a hint of joy and prophetic excitement) that "by the next time we talk, it will be true" paints a striking picture of the undeterred march of organic life towards an undisrupted void

populated only with inorganic objects (Harrison, 2016, p. 9). In *Marjorie Prime*, these inorganic avatars' own constructed memories look back at a human history that was never actually there.

3.5 Reconstructing the primal landscape in the age of avatarization

After Marjorie's death in the play, the Prime version of Marjorie refers to an article she has recently read, which features a species of penguins that exist only on the island of Madagascar: "On Madagascar. Just one species. They think sailors must have brought them. In the 18th century. Brought them there and left them behind. Think of that . . . . Now penguins are all that's left of them" (Harrison, 2016, p. 43). This is an apt image for the family: like old sailors who are now penguins, like astronauts who are now a few footprints and a flag on the moon, and like Ozymandias who is now dust, Harrison's characters are now successfully Primes in the "bright void of a living room", the unity of which is unaffected by the "great deal of time [that] has passed" (Harrison, 2016, p. 59). In the final scene, Harrison removes the roof of the living room and exposes the "Milky Way" (Harrison, 2016, p. 59). United with the earth and the sky, *Homo Primuses*, as objects, enjoy the recycled, immortally looped versions of what were once the lives of the family that lived in the living room. The ontology of avatarization in Jordan Harrison's *Marjorie Prime* outlines humankind's ambivalent drives, which are fulfilled through a rehearsal of death that takes place in the plane of objecthood. Whereas they successfully transition into an inorganic state, they nonetheless preserve some sort of proxy identity to live through their thanatophobia and survival instinct.

Artificial Intelligence is the current final step in homo sapiens' warfare, allied with its objects, against its chronic thanatophobia. Whether through writing,

building, founding, establishing, or collecting, human beings have always endowed objects with parts of themselves to survive their own death through their belongings or productions. Baudrillard states that this is the reason why people "seek out signs extrinsic to their own time or space. . . . *merely because [they have] survived, and thus become the sign[s] of an earlier life*" (1968, pp. 75, 83). As memorabilia of life and death petrified outside time and space, objects have always been a shelter where human beings take refuge against their fear of demise, and the act of possessing objects has always been the "refuge-seeking procedure" through which they can rehearse and dissolve the anxiety of death as Baudrillard calls it (1968, p. 96). In this sense, *avatarization* is the twenty-first century equivalent of transubstantiation through iconographies and sculptures in the past: avatars are the immortal injections of anxious mortals into (cyber-)objecthood, just as paintings and statues were transferences of the anxiety of death into canvas and marble; and again, just as they did with their paintings and statues, anxious mortals in the age of avatarization keep their objects, instilled with their thanatophobia, close to them in their domestic chambers, in their living rooms.

3.6 Conclusion

Jordan Harrison's *Marjorie Prime* (2016) tells the story of a family trying to cope with the reality of their mortality with the help of a new technology that allows a facsimile holographic version of the deceased member of the family to get involved in their life, gradually increasing his/her resemblance to the original. In doing so, Harrison converts the stage into a locus of rehearsal of mortality. The podium in its entirety becomes a metaphysical void of unity where the clay and flesh, earth and sky, object and subject, organic and inorganic are integrally connected, not yet

dissected or disambiguated by any divinity. The living room of complete interwovenness in Harrison's play is habitable by both biological and cyber entities where avatars gradually take over life, that is, in its entirety, the antechamber of death. They in turn relieve individuals from their despicable task of coping with their inescapable fate of eternal non-existence only to leave them with the metaphysicality and calmness of death itself which, as recognized by Causey, has been the trans-historical desire of humanity.

CHAPTER 4

A PERFECT MODERN PLAY BY MADELEINE GEORGE

The (curious case of the) Watson Intelligence by Madeleine George (2014) is a Pulitzer finalist play that connects four different time periods through a single storyline revolving around the characters of Eliza, Merrick, and Watson. Although the specific issues that trouble the characters change in accordance with their daily routines and the zeitgeist of their time, the overarching theme that ties all of these variables together is humanity's dependence on human connection and struggles surrounding the idea of dependency itself. The four different historical moments in the play are roughly 1876, 1891, 1931, and 2011. The difference spanning a period as lengthy as almost 150 years is bound to have particulars and era-specific problems, but the fragmented imagery of the story comes together to form a composite grid at the end that mimics the overall structure built by the communicatory technologies of the last century: connecting seemingly infinitely distant persons. The play weaves era-specific matters into its braid-like structure that bounces in-between different points in time while still following a sequential, linear plot in which the characters seek human connection while remaining entirely reluctant about their dependency.

In the play, the character Watson is the constant through which other characters quench their desire for human connection but also explore the ambiguities of dependency. "*[B]athed in a thin, cool wash that illuminates his body and nothing else*" in an otherwise dark room, Watson is the figure under the spotlight from the beginning of the play (George, 2014, p. 9). Depending on the timeline, the versions of the characters involved change. The eponymous character, chronologically, is

Sherlock Holmes' sidekick Dr. John Watson, Alexander Graham Bell's assistant Thomas A. Watson, a *Jeopardy*-winning "natural-language-processing supercomputer" named Watson, and a Dweeb Team member tech nerd named Joshua Watson (Notes). All of the Watsons are represented as characters who "inspire trust" in others, a feature which leads people to easily bond with them (George, 2014, pp. 21, 35). Having trouble pinpointing the qualities that make him so sympathetic, Eliza remarks,

> … this guy *knows* me. . . . It's some kind of crazy predictive algorithm he's running – not just mirroring, it's enhanced, somehow. It's way more sophisticated than anything you can do, buddy, no offense. . . . This guy is. . . . *preternaturally* chill. . . . I don't understand the mechanism. . . . There's no way I could feel this way about a normal human guy. And you know what they say: when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. (George, 2014, p. 51)

Eliza's way of analyzing her attraction is prognostic of the overall attitude that characters display throughout the play when it comes to the methods through which they seek human connection. Abandoning all hope of re-establishing long-lost human connections via old-fashioned face-to-face interaction, the humans turn to intermediary tools and extensions. In this passage, Eliza, who no longer believes she can "feel this way about a normal human guy," defines Watson as algorithmic, enhanced, preternatural, and mechanic, all adjectives describing a computerized being. Throughout the play, George uses human-machine relationships to demonstrate that human connection is the paradoxical outcome of technology, which both reassembles the cherished human bond and simultaneously pulls people apart. Although the labor for technological progress performed by the characters of Eliza and Merrick is aimed at achieving complete independency, the end goal stands as a monument, au contraire, to the inevitability of human dependency.

This chapter focuses, therefore, on the idea that technological progress is yet another reminder to humanity of its communal nature, and questions how the intrinsic social characteristics of homo sapiens steer and manipulate their technological endeavors despite their contradictory intentions. Thus far, my arguments throughout this thesis have been attempting to establish how twenty-first century theatre represents the concepts of the avatar and cyberspace, and spatially and formally mimics their interwovenness with materiality, while also wrestling with some of the resilient problems of modern drama, such as intra-familial relationships and their reconstructions – or the lack thereof – in the age of the avatar. In this chapter, the question of interpersonal correspondence mediated through technology and its reflections in domestic interiors remains undoubtedly essential. Yet the overt theme of humans' predestined dependency is approached via several time periods that overlap and intertwine with the historical progression of the technology of communication. Ultimately, George demonstrates that despite reflexive conclusions that closely associate technology with alienation, detachment, and disconnectedness (from the self and others all the same), industrial advancements and their functions do not really diverge from the visceral desire for human connection. I argue, hence, that George's work plays on the notion of independence procured via technology and upends it to expose how this intense struggle in fact proves and nurtures the unavoidable interconnectedness within, very much like the fragmented storytelling of the play that ultimately unveils and constructs a singular and linear storyline with common problems, mutual interests, and collective failures.

4.1 (Con)Fusion of connection

In George's play, the interchangeability of human and machine is emphasized by the constant consecutive positioning of the characters' biological and machinal aspects. In the storyline set in 2011, Eliza is a software developer who has parted ways with IBM in order to broaden the functional skillset of Watson, initially invented as a trivia machine, but which now re-sequences itself in line with Eliza's aspirations towards becoming a social-justice assistant for the poor, elderly, veterans, and others who need helpers. An early usage of such symbiotic language for instance refers to Watson's software as a "mental wheelhouse," depicting the brain – although a fairly established saying – as an industrial operating mechanism (George, 2014, p. 10). As the dialogue between Eliza and Watson progresses, the audience is constantly reminded of Watson's status as a cyber-entity through his repetitive, scripted discourse, reminiscent of contemporary software assistants like Siri or Alexa: "I don't think I understand what you mean, but I'd like to. Can you give me a nudge in the right direction?", or "Ask me anything" (George, 2014, pp. 12, 13). However, the same confusion is sometimes projected onto the human characters of the play. The other contemporary version of Watson is Joshua Watson, a Dweeb Team member who wears a t-shirt that reads "*ASK ME ANYTHING!*", which invokes anticipation of an imminent duel between the human and machine in terms of their abilities of providing assistance.

The process of endowing things with unlikely attributes in terms of biology and mechanics works both ways in the play. The software Watson, for example, who is "twenty-six percent complete" at that point, is promised by his creator that he will be "irresistibly sexy" by the end of phase one (George, 2014, p. 12). On the other hand, as contemporary politician Merrick describes Eliza, his ex-wife, whom he pays

the Dweeb Joshua Watson to follow, he remarks, “you can’t see it on the *outside,* of course you can’t tell what she’s made of on the *outside,* but trust me, inside she’s nothing but springs and coils” (George, 2014, p. 43). The constant juxtaposition of human and machine features increases the tension within the conversations, amplifying and bringing forward the issue of a consistent deprivation of human connection. Thus, the concept of *connection* itself is often iterated and put on a pedestal as the desired end to characters’ means.

The (curious case of the) Watson Intelligence, however, is full of disappointed people who exist decades apart yet suffer from a mutual lack: a genuine human connection. Their reactions to this shortcoming differ, yet the disappointment itself is the same. As Eliza reflects to Joshua Watson that she “believed that in marrying [Merrick] [she] was pledging [her] troth to a ‘thinking thing’,” simultaneously, Merrick complains that he “believed that by marrying her [he] would relieve [his] loneliness” and, “[he has] scarcely felt loneliness so stingingly bitter as the loneliness [he has] come to know … within marriage” (George, 2014, pp. 29, 69). George’s question, then, is not necessarily about the existence of others, but rather the manner in which one is to connect with them.

This issue is examined and represented on stage through several thematic strains that problematize and at the same time diversify the analysis of the connective systems at hand. In the play, sex, industry, anatomy, and society are all depicted as networking systems that host endless possibilities, failures, and potentials of connection. Navigating through these domains of interaction, playwright George’s characters voyage towards an ever-receding port where they can drop anchor.

4.2 Politics of connection

> Watson of 2011: "I like veins. I like networks and systems. I like to see how things connect, on the inside." (George, 2014, p. 58)

Importantly, the play often represents the human and machine dichotomy via personal relationships. Time and again, characters come to realize that the networks they try to construct often lack at least one human variable that renders the system incomplete, be it sex, anatomy, or societal reciprocity. Seeing how things connect in these systems of politics or electrical wiring or binary coding is often staggeringly difficult for the characters, who need the Watsons to arrive and establish, or at least point out, connections that they fail to notice. In return, the Watsons' simple and selfless actions create awe and confusion in beholders who do not frequently experience such unmotivated behavior in others. For example, in 2011, software developer Eliza cannot make sense of the arbitrary favors performed by her lover, Joshua Watson, and in 1931, the interviewer Eliza at the Bell Labs cannot grasp how a person can be willingly overshadowed by another for the greater good. How networks and systems work is based on the elimination of disconnections within, and Watson repeatedly enters the stage to treat these disconnections.

The Dweeb Team Watson is an IT person who works on computer systems professionally, and bridges the two worlds in which people's lives are interconnected:

> MERRICK: Even my car, I mean, that's a highly technical piece of machinery but if I get a flat I can at least pull over and put on the spare. I can at least *point* to the carburetor. But this? And my entire life is trapped on the thing, privileged correspondence, bank statements.
> ….
> WATSON: To be honest I don't know what an auditor is.
> MERRICK: No of course not, who does, who does? But this is the problem, isn't it: people aren't informed. They can't even name the parts of the machine they're living in. I mean no offense intended. (George, 2014, p. 15)

In this scene, Merrick talks about the public's ignorance of the political system they live in and how they are not able to diagnose which (dis)connections are there between different locations and titles. Ironically, he suffers from the same ignorance regarding the cyber-network in which his transactions and communications are immersed. The multifaceted nature of networks containing everyday life is emphasized in a single scene where each person is oblivious about the other layer. The intertwinement of these spaces -also stressed through the braided timeline of the play- is used to represent how both politics and computers are machinery with bureaucratic modus operandi and how entirely retreating into one of these realms disables and disconnects one from a functional, complex grid.

This intersectionality of systems drives Eliza to enhance IBM's *Jeopardy!*-winning super-computer Watson into a "highly sociable" device which is not only going to answer questions, "but it'll also ask … questions of its own … in response to [one's] emotional cues." (George, 2014, p. 38). Going beyond the functionality of a state-of-the-art calculator, Eliza wants to turn Watson into an active agent that takes part in societal correspondence and operates as a personalized helper for people in need. Her desire to provide these people with a proxy intermediary between themselves and the bureaucratic tasks they need to perform also constitutes a promising attempt to connect these spaces, cyber and material. Eliza's vision labors towards a world where self-regulating cyber entities can interact with people, personally connect with them, and strive for social justice.

This image resonates deeply with how Alexander Graham Bell's assistant, Thomas Watson, defines his role in providing personal support for Mr. Bell. In 1931, Thomas Watson is invited to a radio program to narrate the origin story of the

telephone, as well as the famous first exchange between himself and Mr. Bell that followed:

> WATSON: … What my friend and mentor called out to me in that famous first sentence ever conveyed by wire was “Mr. Watson, come here, I want you.” It is often misquoted.
> ELIZA: I have it here in the notes as “Mr. Watson, come here, I want to see you.”
> WATSON: Misquoted. . . . The two words that seem to you a minor difference, to me spell the difference between a man calling out to an acquaintance for generalized assistance, and a man calling out to his intimate friend for a service only he can render. (George, 2014, p. 48)

The structure within this system of two agents is reliant on the agents themselves. What Watson provides Bell with is *personal* in addition to being functional. Thus, the worth of his support is not fractional or partial. His value for Bell is engraved in his entire being and is not limited to the professional service he can offer. The uniqueness of his status for Bell makes him unsubstitutable, invaluable, irreplaceable. The work they conduct is possible only through their mutual effort, which is available as long as these two unique persons are connected and ready to interact in a functional system, which itself is dependent on the existence of these two agents. Dependence, therefore, is a constituent within a working system that needs to be acknowledged.

4.3 Dreams of a mechanical genesis

The (curious case of the) Watson Intelligence is structured around a series of oppositions, including proximity and distance, dependence and independence, autonomy and heteronomy, and the desire for human connection that is immediately interwoven with technology. The Sherlock-era Merrick of the play portrays an industrial engineer who designs and manufactures innovative technologies and describes his recently prototyped pistol as such:

> It performs a paradoxical pair of functions: it brings its user and target closer together, allowing a man to pierce the heart of another man from a great distance. And it holds its user and target apart, sparing us the intimacy of carnal combat, the inconvenience of having to come within arm's reach of a foe and club him to death like a savage. Viz, it is a perfect modern instrument. (George, 2014, p. 54)

The passage depicts a carnal, intimate exchange as savage behavior while associating the distanced form of the same action with modernity. The pistol in this specific product promotion speech can easily be replaced by the telephone within the greater context of the play. Graham Bell's famous invention connects people regardless of the chasm in-between and simultaneously keeps them apart by abolishing the need for physical assembly for interaction and communication. Merrick prophesizes from the rostrum to the crowd that the modernist industrial endeavor is a paradoxical act that brings people closer in its communicatory function, but in doing so, sacrifices the tactility of human connection and promotes physical detachment. In an era of mechanical communication, humanity navigates their dialogues through the intermediary vessels at hand, surrendering – although this surrender is celebrated by Merrick – the very idea that they strive to obtain through technology. Thus, the machinery of communication acts as the placeholder for human connection, both dissolving and recrafting it as a substituent in a new form.

Befitting the dichotomy between primitive and modern, Merrick stands for the detached form of human reciprocity elegized by George: he uses compensatory forms of interactive media, and dreams of a future where he successfully simulates his wife's physical and vocal attributes and no longer needs her touch, so he can do away with human inefficiencies and potential betrayals altogether. Merrick is the inventor of the Merrick Greaseless Piston, "a turning point in the history of steam engineering" (George, 2014, p. 62). Harbinger of the roaring advent of modern interaction, moans of pleasure silenced by "*the blast of a steam engine*", heartbeats

of excitement on sternums replaced by "*the rhythmic sound of … pistons, clacking cross-ties, rocketing wheels*", and the carnality of sex overshadowed by the penetration of heavy machinery into intimate relationships, Merrick is less interested in reacquiring a face-to-face, in-flesh form of communication than in promoting a form of human contact that is patched-over, augmented, and ultimately replaced by technology (George, 2014, p. 57):

> I conjure for you a future peopled with miniature machines, in every room of the home, on every street corner and in every shop. Noiseless doors that operate from yards away at the touch of a hydraulic button. Coal-fired hinge-mounted knives that may chop an entire bushel of apples in under an hour. A personal valet made of rivets and plates, whose brass caress, as he fits a man into his jacket, is a thousand times more sure than any boy's could ever be. In an insecure world filled with disloyal people, might we not finally find peace in this Mechanical Garden of Eden, where perfect servants greet us at every turn? What else may be mechanized, sirs, when such devices become commonplace? Where else in the world may we behold this new perfection? Everywhere around us, gentlemen. Everywhere around us. (George, 2014, p. 55)

What Merrick sells in his presentation to the Upperton Club members is dreams and promises of a future where the human being is rendered obsolete. His aspiration, stemming from his paranoid, conspiratorial accusations towards his wife, is to move away from the fickle nature of humanness and into the realm of predictable algorithms with no possibility of betrayal or surprise. The solution he claims for re-constructing a prelapsarian utopia is to flood the earth with this "new perfection", to upgrade our biological and defective ways of doing things into formulaic and foreseeable mechanical interactions. While Merrick's storyline is permeated with references to utopias or perfection, George is also quick to detail the dark side of his lust for progress.

The Sherlockian timeline initially starts with Eliza paying a visit to Sherlock Holmes to seek help. Because Holmes is not there at that particular moment, Dr. John Watson, although a bit clumsily, takes on the case. Eliza reveals to Dr. Watson

some markings that mysteriously appeared on her hands and adds that she suspects that her husband Merrick had something to do with their appearance. Disguising himself as Dr. Mycroft in an effort to uncover the secret behind the puncture marks around Eliza's hands, Dr. Watson confronts Merrick and attempts to unveil his intentions. Addressing Dr. Watson, Merrick outlines his motivations for crafting technological replacements for human beings:

> There is no end to the work demanded of us in the effort to know another – it is an endless engine chugging away, day and night, in the backmost corner of our minds. And like all inefficient work, it sheds heat in all directions, burning off in wasteful plumes the precious mental energy that those of us who earn our living by our wits require to power our daily activities. My mind is my livelihood, Dr. Mycroft, and I cannot afford to have it ill occupied with the vicissitudes of a baffling but constant interaction. (George, 2014, p. 68)

Efficiency and predictability being his priorities, Merrick aims to minimize human interaction while preserving the satisfaction he acquires from it. Starting out as a project to keep his wife in his sight at all times, his new enterprise is a "holding mechanism" resulting from his paranoid ruminations about his wife leaking his designs and prototypes to his opponents in the industrial engineering arena (George, 2014, p. 70). Attempting to eliminate any unpredictability and doubt about his wife's behavior, he sketches out a design to fixate Eliza in his study. Yet, this immobility is not enough in itself since Eliza will be there against her will and the design in this stage will not entirely dispose of the dreadful task of human interaction. Hence, he ventures to produce the perfect company by doing away "with the wriggling creature at the center altogether, and construct[ing] both wife and chair [himself]", and finally have the reassuring voice and touch of his wife while ridding himself of his paranoia of betrayal that comes with the capricious nature of humanness (George, 2014, p. 70).

Merrick's dream of a humanless future, although represented as utopian, is quite disturbing, especially considering that his methodology includes exerting extraordinary violence upon his wife by puncturing her skin without her consent or even knowledge. The construction of such a fantasy through violating the bodily autonomy of the person/victim who will be replaced in the end resonates with George's overall elegiac tone on technological progress and prowess. Importantly, Merrick's futuristic fantasies are also automatically primitivist: during his dialogue with Dr. John Watson, he revisits the Edenic imagery, claiming that his wife's "wiles and wishes are no more a trial to [him] than Eve's were to Adam," and opines that he will soon "be free of her bewitchments" (George, 2014, pp. 63-64).

Disconcerting ideas in themselves, sacrificing the human touch in the name of technological and communicatory progress, minimizing human interaction, and establishing substitutive forms of correspondence are often associated with undesirable outcomes in the play. The same paradigm applies to the storyline of the auditor Merrick, who, in 2011, resorts to another criminal act and pays Joshua Watson to tail his ex-wife to find out with whom she has sex. His lack of interest in establishing human connection marshals him towards a violation of Eliza's freedom and safety. Furthermore, in attempting to use a proxy to compensate for the personal interaction he avoids and to reach the desired information via surreptitious means, he ends up surrendering another one of his desires to the proxy he hires: having sex with his ex-wife. His aspiration of minimizing the personal interaction with his ex-wife while also trying to communicate with her backfires and he becomes the medium through which Eliza and Watson connect in the most carnal way. The elimination of human connection and its undesirable outcomes in the play regularly hint at George's general inclination towards a pro-human connection standpoint.

4.4 Dependence of counterparts in networks

The fragmented storylines within the play, regardless of their unique romantic or criminal foci, question the limits of human connection and counter it with the concept of dependence. The reason both Victorian and contemporary versions of Eliza and Merrick have trouble establishing a human connection is their phobia of dependence. Dependence implies that there is a counterpart to the dependent that is indispensable. Therefore, dispensing with it means either the destruction of the dependent, or the annulment of the status of the dependent *as* dependent since there is no longer a counterpart for it to depend upon. These two contrasting perspectives are contended by Eliza the radio interviewer in 1931 and Merrick the auditor in 2011. The former perspective presupposes that the structure of dependence is asymmetrical:

> ELIZA: Can I ask – how did you handle being so dependent on him?
> WATSON: … I had transformed myself into a sensitive instrument, allowing myself to grow into the peaks and valleys of my friend's needs, learning what he preferred and what he disliked, when to come towards him and when to recede. . . .
> ELIZA: But that must have been so humiliating for you, giving yourself over to him like that.
> WATSON: … I enjoyed the quiet pleasure of knowing that I was indispensable to the process. My Bell, you see, was a visionary, but a clumsy man. He could never have constructed those two hundred and fourteen prototypes without my skilled hands…
> ELIZA: But – it must have been so *excruciating* for you to connect with him and then -. I mean now that he's gone, you're *nothing* without him. You'll never be just yourself again, always Watson to his Bell.
> WATSON: … the ones who have made their mark on history, are in fact surrounded by a halo of shadowy figures, other less extraordinary people whose role it has been to help the extraordinary person make his mark. Assistants, transcriptionists, secretaries. (George, 2014, pp. 78-79)

In this brief exchange, Eliza focuses on her side of the structure, assuming that the counterpart, the side that she is dependent upon, is itself independent. Watson's argument on the other hand, regards both ends as dependent on each other and suggests that his role was also crucial for the process of inventing the telephone.

Pointing to the collective effort and division of labor within the process, Watson draws human connection and dependence near each other. As long as there is connection, since even the most extraordinary people *need* help, there is dependence. Therefore, this need constantly constructs new forms of networks and alternative spaces of interaction and interdependence aiming to minimize disconnection.

The alternative to this structure is absolute independence, which consists of singular points with no human connection, surrounded by a halo of aiding mechanisms instead of "other less extraordinary people" (George, 2014, p. 79). Merrick's Mechanical Garden of Eden is one such example where people are no longer dependent on the human touch and are rather able to function through their machines. The overlapping discourse of the Sherlock-era Merrick and the 2011 auditor Merrick declares that "Sometimes the only way to achieve independence is to destroy the thing you're dependent upon," one referring to his wife, the other to the current welfare state system, both essentially trying to get rid of the horror of a feminized idea of dependence (George, 2014, p. 53). This interpretation of Merrick's slogan points to the fact that contemporary Eliza's methodology is not remarkably different from his radical solution of cutting out the roots to render one free of all connection to other life. She, too, rather than being dependent on someone, chooses to remove that person from her life altogether, only to realize that no matter what she does, she is connected to everyone else through some medium, be it work, love, or even loneliness.

Beginning with her first description of her love affair with the IT guy Joshua Watson, Eliza constantly attempts to pinpoint or rationalize her interest. Watson, at first glance, seems like someone to whom Eliza would never be attracted. This strategy, however, according to Bell's assistant, is faulty from the get-go and finding

a logical explanation as to why we connect with people is redundant because we have no other option:

> Connection isn't elegant, or precise, or rational. . . . We are all born insufficient, and must look to others to supplement our strength. That is no weakness, it is the first condition of human life. . . . If we did not rely upon each other so deeply, our nation would not now be strung like a vast, glittering web with eight million miles of connecting wire. (George, 2014, p. 80)

The fact that grids of connection constantly appear in every dimension of life, to Watson, proves that the existence and emergence of these networks are inevitable. Political, personal, cyber, or electrical networks all share in their essence the virtue that they are human constructs. The "constellations of data" apparent within and amongst these networks are destined to be shared by interdependent agents navigating through these different domains consistently and perpetually, connecting and re-connecting with each other while enabling the transference of such information and interaction (Gibson, 1984, p. 94). Such navigation is mimicked by George's construction of the formal elements of the play.

4.5 Braided networks of time, space, and people

The characters within George's play stand for multiple persons. Watson, for instance, is described within an age gap of "20s to 60s" in the characters section (2014). Eliza stands for a contemporary software developer, a concerned Victorian age wife, and an interviewer. Merrick stands for a paranoid Victorian industrial engineer, and a modern-day candidate for city auditor. The simultaneity of different timelines and the co-habitancy of the same space recall the intersectionality of different forms of networks; just as these intersections function harmoniously, so too is the storyline braided into a meaningful grid in the end.

The setting of the play is defined as “a coffee shop, a bedroom, a train, a train station platform, a pie shop”, all “made out of the same materials and elements”, and “in the same space” (George, 2014). The immediate emphasis on the metamorphosis of space uproots and dematerializes the action on stage into a state of constant flight towards another setting in another timeline. The space, by this feature, is also non-space within the play where the content dictates over the locus and the timeline. The section of the story at a particular moment defines the setting of the play since the space is always the same, including the same elements. Amorphous in its essence, George’s space is equal to what is happening at that moment on stage. The transformation between different spaces, thus, also occurs via the progression of the storyline into one of its several potentialities. In the play, characters, time, and space exist as potentials that are actualized through the “*laser-sharp switch[es]*” in-between locations and characters (George, 2014, p. 28):

> *(In black, the telephone rings.)*
> *(First ring: jangly – wall-mounted phone box.)*
> *(Second ring: shrill – midcentury rotary.)*
> *(Third ring: digital – 90s cordless)*
> *(Lights up, suddenly, on the office.)*
> *(Fourth ring: the marimba tone of a smartphone, coming from the device in* ELIZA*’s hand.)* (George, 2014, p. 9)

The play opens with a set of sounds of ringtones that progress with each ring from the primitive form of a wall-mounted phone box into a smartphone. This outline of the last 150 years of life on earth through the sounds of different telephone models also implies how the timeline on stage at any moment should be deduced from the soundscape: the whistle of an oncoming train or the blip of a text message. The technological cues also transform the characters; at times, this process requires little preparation or physical effort, as indicated with simple stage directions such as “Watson *becomes* Watson”, which, in themselves, also do not disclose anything

about the particular version of the character on stage (George, 2014, p. 20). One such example occurs during auditor Merrick's speech, which starts during the contemporary timeline but then drags the play more than a century back by morphing into inventor Merrick's performance:

> *(Continuously, as he speaks,* MERRICK *begins undoing his necktie, unbuttoning his shirt, disorganizing his hair. He begins to groom himself to present at the Upperton Club in Pall Mall: re-combs his hair in the Victorian style, re-buttons his collar, puts on and ties an ascot-style necktie.)* (George, 2014, p. 53)

The sudden disconnections and re-connections within the formal scheme of the play determine which of the networks will be activated as they all readily exist on stage as potentials. This change, as it can be immediate in laser-sharp transformations, can also proceed gradually, shifting the other connected elements of the play in unison with itself. Merrick, in reshaping his outward appearance and clothing style, also transforms the space and time of the play.

4.6 Conclusion

All characters, timelines, places, and conversations connecting to each other, the play results in a braided continuity. Connecting the play's personal, spatial, and temporal networks and manipulating all of them through themselves, the characters become constants that live in all of these networks as potentials, waiting to be channeled and spawned onto the stage. Characters on stage are, at any moment, characters-to-be, since their ethereal existence is not rooted in any time or space, but instead is in flight towards other networks. Such a structure opens up many possibilities of combinations amongst the intermingled, simultaneously existent planes of the play. To add yet another connection to the potpourri, George lands one final blow to the fourth wall just before the curtain closes:

> ELIZA: We're sharing a drink we call loneliness, but it's better than drinking alone. . . . I just mean, I'm connected to them. Other people. Everywhere around us. Everywhere around us.
> *(*MERRICK *and* ELIZA *look at each other.)*
> *(They look out at everyone else.)*
> *(Lights.)* (George, 2014, p. 88)

Including the audience into the braid with one final twist, George constructs a stage where all of its formal elements intertwine into a hybrid potentiality above any fixed space or time, a braid woven with material and immaterial networks alike. The moment Eliza and Merrick look at the audience, the audience is immersed in the play, and everything performed on stage now applies to them also. The story, the connections and disconnections, the grid, is entirely theirs. Ending with the same words of Victorian Merrick's speech, the final scene constructs another Edenic image where the world is not peopled with machinery, but with reciprocation, with dualities connecting with, looking at, and depending on each other.

In the broader context of this thesis, aside from looking at Edenic potentialities in the future narrated by various characters throughout its plot, the play's main involvement in the issue of potentiality stems from the uncertain and unfinalized stance it takes at any moment on stage. The thematic and formal parallelisms consistently push one to consider combinations in-between timelines, characters, and concepts. While frequently emphasizing the importance and inevitability of dependence in human relations, the play simultaneously constructs an extensive, intra-dependent network combining timelines, spaces, and people that are apart. The strategies used by George include soundscapes, outfits, and emblematic items such as electronic devices or products of popular brands that herald shifts in time and place. What these shifts achieve is the organization of an intertwined medium of complex juxtapositions involving the past and future, material and cyber, human and non-human. Therefore, such binaries, ultimately, all embody the

overarching dichotomous, interpolar exchange between dependents the play aptly utilizes to represent the intermingled and unavoidable nature of modern communication and interaction.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

"The medium is the message."

– Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964)

"Petroleum resists the five act structure."

– Bertolt Brecht, *A Short Organum for the Theatre* (1949)

The goal of this thesis has been to investigate how avatarization and its characteristics challenge the traditional theatre stage and force the artform to construct a contemporary medium that can contain the unfinalized, ubiquitous, ambiguous essence of the era. To do so, I have chosen three Pulitzer finalist plays that were critically acclaimed yet academically somewhat ignored. The fact that all three plays took on the issues of potentiality, simultaneity, and in-betweenness within the context of contemporary technologies while at the same time problematizing their retrospective inclusion in some of the domestic themes resiliently occupied the theatre stage for a long time has been particularly interesting for me. Searching for a long-lost maternal bond, attempting to reconstruct the nuclear family, struggling with disconnectedness in an era of constant communication are the specific themes to which the plays I chose hearken back. What I sought to demonstrate throughout my analysis of the plays was the parallelism between the thematic and formal elements of the plays which in turn, I argued, created a hybrid structure, a cyberstage that ably mediatizes the contemporary content that vigorously resists the rigidity of the traditional stage. In other words, the thematic juxtaposition of the old and new, familiar and unusual, corporeal and virtual was mirrored by the formal strategies

employed by the playwrights in a new theatrical environment suitable for the undelineable subject of virtuality.

Neither relying on the safe and firm ground of the traditional theatre nor succumbing to the trend of avatarizing the proscenium stage altogether, the plays by Rolin Jones, Jordan Harrison, and Madeleine George swam against the current and stood out. Grasping and representing the indispensable interwovenness of the age of the avatar that far outgrew the limitations of the cyberspace and has long been interacting with the materiality of everyday life, these playwrights "took the [road] less traveled by," and to me, "that has made all the difference" (Frost, 1916, lines 19-20). Hoping to have done at least some justice to the brilliant work these artists have produced, I conclude that the theatre stage in the three plays I analyzed, rather than shying away from its challenging task and retreating back into its safe space, took on the novel problems of this age and addressed the symbiotic composition of the virtual and material in a formally and thematically compelling way that acknowledges the intermingledness within the zeitgeist of the twenty-first century.

Reading these texts before and after COVID-19 were two fundamentally different experiences that raised all sorts of diverse questions for me. Forcing virtuality into daily activities more than ever, the pandemic caused a big shift in perspective for the masses who now realize the material impact the cyber-actions make in our lives. While the outside was – arguably – classless, for instance, in the pre-pandemic world, through COVID-19, it has been the domain of the less privileged and the working class who had to continue their financial endeavors to survive yet another catastrophe. In a similar vein, socializing in virtual meeting environments has become a regular, if not banal, occurrence in the last few years, through which many mourned the tactility and carnality of individual exchanges that

seemed irretrievably lost. This period also forced theatre-makers to convert their otherwise material endeavors into online and virtual ventures that employ cyber-meeting applications that allowed cyberformances to take place through a global pandemic. Moreover, as a mandatory version of the initial impulse of immersing theatre into cyberspace in its entirety, an impulse that I have criticized in the Introduction section of this thesis, the Covid-19 cyberformances instituted a nice opposition which may or may not be interpreted as a first aid attempt at resuscitating the artform that as it suffered from a novel coronavirus and its complications. Although it is overwhelmingly interesting from an academic perspective to zoom in (pun intended) on these issues, they are subjects for other theses perhaps to come in the near future. As a final note, I want to acknowledge these avenues left open for future studies related to the issues I have attempted to tackle, and hope to have trodden a path “in leaves no step had trodden black” (Frost, 1916, line 12).

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